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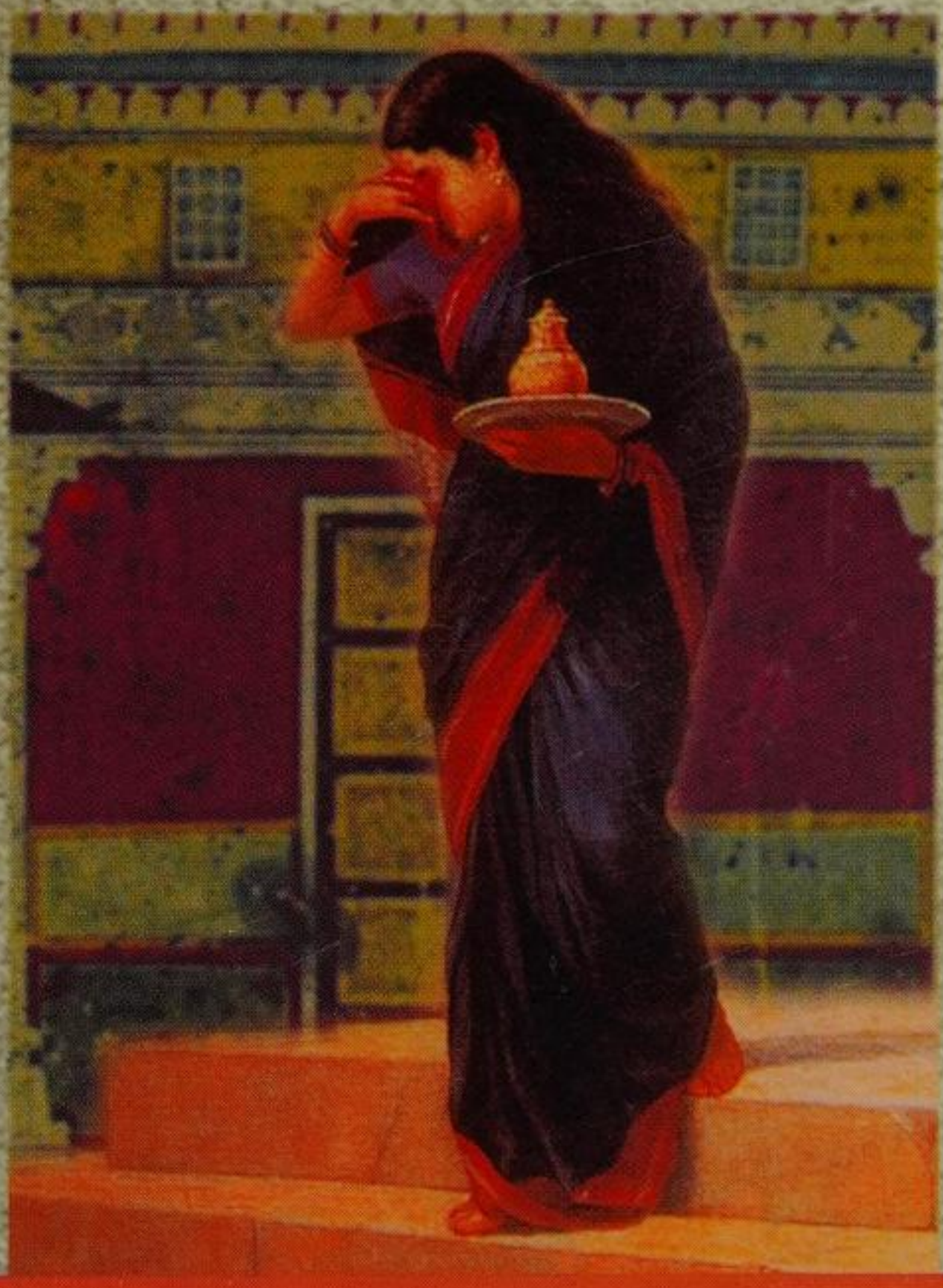
THE SECOND WIFE



PREMCHAND

Translated from Hindi by
David Rubin

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

PREMCHAND (1880-1936). Born in Lamhi village near Varanasi in north India as Dhanpat Rai, Premchand's realistic writings highlighted the social milieu through a multi-faceted portrayal of human nature. The 12 novels, 300 or so short stories (most of them collected in an 8-volume set called *Mansarovar* and in *Soz-e-Watan*), plays and numerous essays — all add up to make him not only one of the most prolific but also marvellously creative writers, who came to be regarded as the spokesman of the disinherited and the downtrodden. *The Second Wife* (titled *Nirmala* in Hindi) represents a high-water mark of Premchand's genius as a creator of realistic fiction.

DAVID RUBIN, scholar and novelist, received his Doctorate in Comparative Literature at Columbia University, USA, and later taught Hindi literature at the same university. Author of three novels set in India, he has also translated two other volumes of Premchand's three volumes of *Chayavadi* poetry and two contemporary Hindi novelists, Susham Bedi and Shrilal Shukla.

'The story proceeds unhampered to its grim, logical conclusion.'

— *Dr. Ramvilas Sharma*
Hindi Literary Critic

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THE SECOND WIFE

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PREMCHAND

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PREMCHAND

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Translator's Introduction

Dhanpat Rai, known as Premchand (1880-1936), is today universally acknowledged as the creator of realistic fiction in both Hindi and Urdu. His career as novelist and journalist was grounded in the humane idealism and unwavering patriotism of the generation which led India to independence. Rejecting the romantic and fantastic tales popular in his youth, he wrote a series of novels and short stories based on the realities of everyday life in India's cities and villages, championing the cause of women, the poor and the oppressed. In many of these works he satirises what he considered outmoded and cruel caste and religious traditions in terms still applicable today. In the course of his relatively short life his fiction gained in psychological subtlety and inventiveness.

Premchand's *Nirmala* was first published serially in the magazine *Chand,* from November 1925 to November 1926, and in book form in 1927. It has ever since remained one of the writer's most popular novels in India and other countries. There have been multiple editions in Hindi and translations into European as well as other Indian languages. When first published in 1988 this was its first translation into English.

In the twenties, the situation of women had come to be an important theme in Hindi literature, not only in fiction but in poetry as well. Nirala and Pant in particular, in their verses, wrote about specific problems confronting women. Premchand returned

again and again to the theme in his novels and short stories, but nowhere does he present so grimly concentrated a tale of a woman's tragedy as in *Nirmala* — which nevertheless rises above the usual limitations of a *roman a these* in its dramatisation of very specific and highly individualised private lives.

Nirmala, one of Premchand's shortest novels, was written when the author was beginning his final and most successful period as a creator of realistic fiction inspired by contemporary social problems. The book is tighter in construction and less digressive than the earlier novels. Its general view is also darker: the happy resolutions, often brought about by the compelling power of someone's purity and goodness (Premchand's adaptation of the Gandhian concept of *satyagraha*), which often weaken the impact of the novels and stories that preceded *Nirmala,* give way here to a sombre acceptance of misunderstandings and injustice that cannot be rectified by any known human agency. We find no sudden transformations of character, no idealistic conversions. The one example of a radical change in outlook is offered by Rukmini, who is violently hostile to her sister-in-law, Nirmala, through much of the story; she is won over by Nirmala only after years in the same house observing the girl's sufferings. The characters are in general less idealised than in Premchand's earlier works. Nirmala, her husband, Dr. Sinha, Jiyaram, Kalyani, Rukmini, all are moved by many contradictory impulses of decency, malice, generosity, cowardice or courage, and reveal thoroughly human inconsistensies throughout the narrative. Although the frequent violence of the characters' actions, especially in the form of often gratuitous vituperation and outbursts of tears, may seem exaggerated or sentimental, I believe that in fact such moments are fairly realistic dramatisations of typical domestic events of the particular milieu and time. As for what may seem like digressive and unnecessary amplification in dealing with essentially peripheral scenes, such as Moteram's confrontations with Bhalachandra Sinha or his excursion to the sweets bazar, these are Dickensian or Gogolian scenes, exuberant fantasias on eccentricity, which, because of their comic detail and inventiveness, are their own justification; they serve as well to offer a few bright moments in

the overwhelming sadness of this tale of Nirmala's wretched married life.

As one often finds in works first published serially, there are occasional inconsistencies, but these are of little importance. Premchand is careless about questions of time and money. The total time span of the novel is a little over six years, but precisely when during these six years various events take place is often vague. The young man who rejects Nirmala at the beginning of the book is described as a student; the next time he appears, with no indication of time lapse, he is a successful doctor, married and the father of a son. Nirmala's pregnancy is announced by her only when she is in the eighth month: '...she found words for the suspicion which had tormented her for months and which until today she had kept concealed...' As for money, at some points Nirmala seems to have command of hundreds, even thousands of rupees, and is covered with jewels, but all this evaporates with improbable rapidity and no details except that Munshiji has ceased to accept any new law cases and had borrowed money to take out a mortgage. In later stories and his final novel, *Godan,* Premchand will be far more specific and convincing, analysing such matters with Balzacian detail.

Every translator aspires to a rendering of the original that will be as faithful, as literal, as possible. In the case of a work like *Nirmala* some liberties are unfortunately necessary for the work to be comprehensible in another language. Chapter divisions are of course kept as in the original and so also, with few exceptions, is the paragraphing. There are occasional inconsistencies in different printings of the novel, cases in which the translator is obliged to be his own Solomon in choosing the version most appropriate to follow. I have been fortunate in having the advice and suggestions of Sripat Rai, the author's son, in interpreting various passages. As for the liberties I have taken, let me discuss them here.

In the original Hindi, extended dialogues are usually set typographically in the manner of a play:

Krishna — I've had no time during the day.

Nirmala (looking at the thread) — The thread is terribly thin!
Krishna — What do you mean, sister?

I have recast such passages in the manner of ordinary English dialogue, leaving out the names and occasionally adding a 'Nirmala said' or something of the sort to keep the speakers straight in the reader's mind.

'I've had no time during the day,' said Krishna.
Nirmala looked at the thread. 'The thread is terribly thin!' she said.
'What do you mean, sister?'

As for the text itself, translation cannot be as literal, particularly in the dialogue, as in translating from French or German, say, into English. The speech of Premchand's characters drawn from old-fashioned middle-class society in Lucknow, Allahabad and Varanasi, is highly elliptical, metaphorical and allusive. Literal translations would often be meaningless, so equivalents must be found, equivalents which unhappily must sacrifice the salty character of the original. At one point in their conversation Bhalachandra says to his wife, *'Ab tum phir rang badalti ho. Yeh to meri chhati par mung dalna hai,'* i.e., You've changed your colour (attitude) again. This is grinding lentils on my chest. 'By doing this you're causing me a lot of torment.' In their conversation they refer to Udaybhanu's family as *'vahan,'* there: 'You yourself said time after time that I won't do it there,' i.e., 'You yourself said time after time that you wouldn't allow a marriage with those people.' Note here also that there is no indirect discourse in Hindi. In quoting, a Hindi speaker will usually render the discourse with the actual words. Because of this, interior monologues are mostly in the first person; many of these I have rendered in the conventional way of English fiction, that is, in the third person, changing present and future tenses to the appropriate past and conditional.

In traditional homes personal names were used infrequently, particularly by women. Nirmala never once refers to her husband by

name; he is simply *'voh,'* he, used with honorific forms of adjectives and verbs. Her sister-in-law she calls *'Didiji,'* respected elder sister, and Rukmini in turn calls her *'Bahu,'* daughter-in-law. Nirmala's husband is referred to most often as 'Munshiji,' a term used for writers, clerks and any educated member of the Kayastha community to which he belongs; he is also occasionally referred to as *'Vakil Sahib,'* as one might say in French *'monsieur l'avocat.'* I have tended to retain these designations and, where necessary, have supplied a footnote for clarification. In many cases I have supplied a name where in Hindi the particular form of verb makes the reference clear without using a name. For cetain specific Indian sweets, such as *laddu* and *rabri,* I have attempted no translation but have left it to the reader to imagine what he likes.

It may often strike a Western reader as odd that the characters are so intensely concerned with self-respect, public image or 'face,' but this concern is absolutely fundamental in the society Premchand is describing. Time and time again someone in the story is devastated because, as the text has it, *'Kisi ne kuch kaha tha', 'kisi ne kuch kaha hoga'* — literally, someone said (or must have said) something; in these cases I have taken the liberty of supplying what is understood, namely, someone must have said something nasty or disgracing, someone must have complained, etc.

Among other points to cite which may make the novel more accessible to the Western reader is the Indian's horror, still common among the uneducated, of hospitals. The traditional view all too frequently supported by experience. This explains Totaram's hesitation and guilt about sending his son to a hospital. The reader will also observe the extreme, even ritualistic, importance attached to eating. Note that in traditional homes women did not eat with their menfolk but waited for them to finish before they themselves would touch food. Again, in traditional homes, the first big meal of the day was not what we would call a breakfast, that is, food taken on rising, but somewhat later, at nine, ten or eleven, and a rather more extensive repast than we would be likely to take at such an hour. There would also be tea in the afternoon and another big meal at any time during the evening.

In transliterating Indian names I have opted to dispense with diacritical marks and to use instead phonetic or conventional English spellings. Note only that Nirmala's sister is 'Krishna,' the feminine form of the Krishna more familiar to Western readers.

As *Nirmala* speaks so eloquently for itself I have foregone any attempt at extended analysis of it here. The novel makes its appeal on a basis of universal human experience that transcends any local peculiarities of customs or culture. Nirmala is a fragile and touching heroine, endearing through her weaknesses as much as her genuine virtues. Three generations of Indians have wept with her and, despite the immense changes that have come to India during this time — changes in attitude, sensibility and aspiration — it is very likely that generations to come will continue to sympathise with this girl whose greatest sin was to require a husband who would accept her without a dowry.

David Rubin

THE SECOND WIFE

1

Although there were scores of relatives living in Udaybhanu's household — maternal and paternal uncles, nephews and nieces — we are not concerned with them here. Udaybhanu was a fine lawyer, fortune had smiled upon him, and to give shelter to the impoverished members of his clan was only his filial duty. But our concern is only with his daughters, the elder named Nirmala and the younger Krishna. Until only yesterday both were still playing with dolls. Nirmala was fifteen, Krishna only ten, but in their temperaments and habits there was scarcely any difference. Both were lively, playful and mad about shows and excursions, both married off their dolls with pomp and circumstance, and both constantly shirked their household duties. Their mother kept calling out for them, but unsure about the task they were being summoned to, they would hide themselves on the terrace. They fought with their brothers, scolded the servants and as soon as they heard the sound of music in the street would rush to stand in the doorway. But today, quite suddenly, an event occurred which made the elder a grown-up while the younger remained only a child: Krishna was her old self, but Nirmala had now become serious, shy and fond of solitude.

For months now Udaybhanu had been negotiating Nirmala's marriage. Today his labour had borne fruit, for he had finalised her alliance with Babu Bhalachandra Sinha's eldest son, Bhuvan Mohan. The groom's father had declared that he didn't care whether

Udaybhanu gave a dowry or not. Of course, the members of the marriage party ought to be treated with the customary respect and hospitality, so that there was no occasion for either of the families being held in ridicule. Now, Udaybhanu was a lawyer, he had never known how to save money. The dowry was a difficult problem before him. So when the groom's father himself told him he was not the least concerned about a dowry, he almost got back lost eyesight. He had feared that he would have to go begging to all and sundry, and had already made arrangements with a couple of money-lenders. He had estimated that even with strict economies the wedding would cost him not less than twenty thousand rupees. Reassured now by Babu Udaybhanu, he could scarcely conceal his joy.

This news sent the naive girl to sit in a corner with her face covered. A peculiar doubt had entered her heart, and her whole body was possessed by an unfamiliar dread. She did not know what was going to happen. She was not aware of any of those ecstatic feelings which find expression in the girls' sidelong glances, the sweet smile on their lips and the languor in their limbs. On the contrary, she experienced not longing but only doubt, worry and fearful imaginings. The full blaze of youthful awareness had not yet dawned on her.

Krishna knew something, but not everything: her sister would get fine jewellery, the musicians would play at the door, the guests would gather, there would be dancing. And so she was happy. She also knew that her sister would embrace everyone and weep and make her departure from home in tears, while she herself would be left alone. And knowing this, she was sad. But she did not understand why all this was happening, or why her mother and father were so eager to drive her sister out of the house. She had said nothing offensive to anyone nor quarrelled with anybody. Would these people throw her out of the house, would she, too, sit like that in a corner and cry with no one to pity her? And so Krishna was also frightened.

One evening Nirmala went up to the roof alone, staring up at the sky with yearning eyes. She had fantasised how if she had wings she would fly away and escape these aggravations.

Of late the two sisters had been going out frequently for buggy rides. If the buggy wasn't free they would go strolling in the garden. So Krishna had been going around looking for her sister; when she couldn't find her she came up on the roof and as soon as she saw her laughed and said, 'Here you are hiding and I've been looking for you. Come along, I've arranged for the buggy.'

Indifferently, Nirmala said, 'You go on, I'll stay here.'

'No, my dear *Didi*[1], you really must come this time! Just feel how cool the breeze is.'

'No, I'm not in the mood, you go along.'

Tears came to Krishna's eyes. Her voice trembling, she said, 'Why won't you come now? Why won't you talk to me? Why are you always hiding? I get upset just sitting around all by myself. If you won't come, I won't go out either, I'll just stay here and sit with you.'

'And after I've left, what will you do?' Nirmala asked her. 'Who are you going to play with? Tell me, who'll you go out walking with?'

'I'll leave with you, I couldn't stand it here alone.'

Nirmala smiled. '*Ammaji*[2] wouldn't let you go.'

'Then I won't let you leave. Why don't you just tell *Ammaji* you won't go?'

'That's what I've been saying, but who listens to me?'

'But isn't this *your* house?'

'No — if it were, would they be forcing me to leave it?'

'And will I too then be made to go away some day?' Krishna asked.

'If you're not, will you just stay here doing nothing? We're girls, we don't have a home anywhere.'

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[1] Elder sister.
[2] Mother.

'And will Chandar be sent away, too?'

'Chandar's a boy, who'd send him away?'

'Then girls must be very wicked?'

'If they weren't,' Nirmala said, 'would they be chased out of their homes?'

'But Chandar's very naughty, still nobody chases him away, while you and I never do anything bad at all.'

Suddenly Chandar came up on the roof with a great clatter and when he saw Nirmala, said laughing, 'So this is where you are! Soon there'll be music, *Didi* will be a bride and climb into the palanquin.'

Chandar, whose full name was Chandrabhanu Sinha, was three years younger than Nirmala, two years older than Krishna.

'If you tease me,' Nirmala said, 'I'll go to mother and tell her.'

'Why are you so huffy? You'll hear the music too.' He laughed. 'Now you're going to be a bride! Kishni, you'll hear it too, music such as you've never heard before.'

'Even better than the band?' Krishna asked.

'Oh yes, even better than the band, a thousand times, a hundred thousand times better! You know what? When you heard one band you began to think there couldn't be any better than that. But these musicians will wear red uniforms and red hats, they'll look so wonderful — how can I tell you? There'll be fireworks too and rockets shooting up in the skies and when they reach the stars then red and yellow and green and blue stars will explode and drop down. You'll love it.'

'What else will there be, Chandar, tell me, *bhaiya*[3].'

'Come for a walk with me and I'll tell you everything on the way. You'll see spectacles that will make your eyes pop. There'll even be fairies flying in the air, real fairies.'

'Let's go then, but if you don't tell me I'll beat you.'

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[3] Brother.

Chandrabhanu and Krishna went off but Nirmala stayed, sitting alone. She was very depressed by the way Krishna had deserted her, Krishna whom she loved like her own self and who had now been so unkind, going away and leaving her alone. Nothing had actually happened; but the grieving heart is like an injured eye, hurt even by the breeze. Nirmala wept for a long time. Her brothers and sister, mother and father would forget her like this, all of them would become indifferent to her. And perhaps she would probably find herself yearning for them.

In the garden the flowers were blooming, giving out their sweet fragrance in the cool light breeze of early April. Stars were scattered across the sky. Lost in her melancholy thoughts Nirmala fell asleep and the moment she closed her eyes she began to wander in a land of dreams. What she sees is a turbulent river before her and herself waiting on the bank for a boat. It is evening and the darkness is closing in on her like a frightful beast. She is terribly anxious about getting across the river, about reaching home. She weeps, hoping it won't turn to night for how is she to get home alone? Suddenly a beautiful ship appears, coming towards the shore. She springs up joyfully and as soon as the ship reaches the shore she steps forward to board it. But just as she is about to set foot on the deck the boatman cries out, 'No room for you here!' She entreats him, falls at his feet, sheds tears but he insists, 'No room for you here!' In an instant the boat breaks loose. She screams and sobs. Unable to face staying alone on the deserted riverbank the whole night she jumps into the river and tries to catch hold of that ship when suddenly a voice warns her, 'Stop! The river's deep, you'll drown! That ship is not for you. I'm coming, just get into my boat and I'll take you across.' Terrified, she looks all around to see where this voice is coming from. Soon a small rowboat appears. It has no sail, no rudder, no mast. The hull is cracked, the planks broken, it's full of water and a man is bailing it out. But it's a wreck! How can it make the crossing? The boatman says, 'This has been sent for you, come aboard and sit down.' For a moment she hesitates, 'Sit in that' but finally decides that she must. Sitting in the boat is at least better than being left alone here. Better to drown in the river than end up in the belly of

some horrible wild animal. Who knows, maybe the boat will actually make it across the river. With these thoughts and expecting the worst, she sits down in the boat. For a while it moves along, wallowing and rolling, but at every instant water comes flooding in. Like the boatman she too begins to bale out the water with both the hands until they grow numb, but the water keeps on rising. Then the boat begins to whirl around. She feels as though she's drowning, drowning. She flings out her arms for some help she cannot see, the boat slips under her feet. She screamed, and as soon as she screamed she opened her eyes and found her mother standing before her, shaking her by the shoulders.

2

Babu Udaybhanu's house had turned into something like a market-place. In the veranda the goldsmith's hammers and in the rooms the tailor's needles were busy. Outside under the *neem*[4] tree the carpenter was making the charpoys. In the shed, the earthen ovens were being dug for the sweets-maker. A separate house had been arranged for the guests. It was set up so that for each individual guest there would be a charpoy, a table and a chair. It had been planned that for every three guests there should be a servant. Though there was still a month before the groom's party would arrive, the preparations were already well underway. There would be such hospitality for the groom's people that no one would have the least opportunity to wag their tongues in disapproval. And let those people take note as well that they had brought the young man to the house of somebody of consequence. A whole building was crammed with pots and pans for the feast, there were teasets galore, trays and dishes for snacks, large dinner plates, pitchers, glasses.

Those people of the household who usually were lying around on cots puffing away at their *hookahs*[5] were now diligently applying themselves to work. It would be a long time before they would have

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[4] Margosa.

[5] Consists of an earthen bowl *(chillum)* in which tobacco and lit charcoal are put, a reed pipe runs from the *chillum* to a small water container, from which another pipe juts out which is smoked. *Hookah* is also known as hubble-bubble.

another such opportunity to prove their usefulness. Where only one man was needed, five would come running. Little was accomplished, but the racket was tremendous. Over the slightest trifle there would be discussion and argument for hours and finally they would go to lawyer Udaybhanu, who would be obliged to settle it. One would say that such and such was no good, another that you could get it better in the market, so could he just dash out and fetch it? A third would insist that it stank, a fourth that the third one's nose was insensitive — What do you know about what they call *ghee?*[6] — *You* never heard of *ghee* until you came here, before that you hadn't so much as heard of it! With which the dispute would continue and Udaybhanu would have to settle the argument.

One night at nine Udaybhanu was sitting in his room, making an estimate of his expenses. It was his habit to review his estimate everyday, but everyday there would be some change, some revision. Before him stood his wife, Kalyani, frowning. After a considerable time Udaybhanu looked up and said, 'It won't come to less than ten thousand, in fact it will probably cost even more.'

'In ten days five thousand have turned into ten!' said Kalyani. 'At this rate in a month it will probably reach a hundred thousand.'

'What can I do? Being laughed at is no good either. If they're not satisfied, people will say, 'Big name but a poor show.' And since they're not demanding even a *paisa*[7] for dowry it's my duty to do my best to provide hospitality to the guests.'

Kalyani said, 'Since the day Brahma created the world to this day no one's ever been able to satisfy a wedding guest. They always find some opportunity or other to find fault and criticise. One who can't even afford a dry piece of bread at home becomes a lord at the wedding party. "The oil doesn't smell right," he says, "God knows where they got this cheap soap, the servants don't pay attention, the lantern's smoky. There are bed-bugs in the chairs, the charpoys sag, the guest rooms have no ventilation..." There are always complaints like that by the thousand. If it's not that, then it's something else.

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[6] Clarified butter.
[7] Coin.

"My friend, this oil is fit for the whores, we require plain oil; Sir, this soap is fancy, you're showing off your wealth as though we've never seen soap; these servants aren't servants but fiends from hell, they never leave you in peace. The lanterns are so brilliant they hurt your eyes — if we have to spend another few days in this glare we'll go blind. And the guest rooms! Pity the poor wretches, with the wind constantly gusting in on him from everyside!" So listen to me, once for all and stop worrying about any frills for the wedding guests.'

'Then what is it you want me to do?'

'What I say is, just make a firm decision that you're not going to spend more than five thousand. After all, we've no money in the house, you have to rely on loans. So why go so deep into debt that you won't be able to pay it off in a lifetime? There are other children, don't forget, they'll need something too.'

'May death overtake me!'

'Nobody is sure about life and death.'

'And you just sit around telling me what to do!'

'There's no need to get angry,' said Kalyani. 'We all have to die some day. Not very many immortals have shown up in this world. Just by shutting your eyes you're not going to change the future. Every day I see the father dead and the children getting kicked around in the streets. Who would want to make something like that happen?'

Furious, Udaybhanu said, 'So now I'm to understand that the day of death is drawing near — is this your prophecy? I've never before heard of wives who wanted to be widows! Well, I've really heard something new today. Do you think you'll be happier as a widow?'

'If anybody talks sense to you, you go into a rage — because you think, don't you, "She's got no place to go. She's completely dependent on me for her bread and butter." So if anything's said you start a fight, as though I'm the lowest scullery maid in the house, I'm just good for seeing to the food and clothes. The more I give way, the more you push. So let the spongers squander our wealth so long as nobody opens his mouth, let our money go to waste in liquor and

delicacies so long as nobody wags his tongue. But don't you see, all these mistakes you're making are just going to torment my children later?'

'Do you think I'm your slave?'

'Do you think I'm yours?'

'Well, I'm not one of those men whose wives push them around.'

' And I'm not one of those women who let their husbands beat them.'

'I'm the one who earns. I'll spend as I please and nobody has a right to criticise me for it.'

'Then manage the house yourself!' said Kalyani. 'I'll say good-bye to a house where I'm not respected. I have just as much right in this house as you, not a bit less! If you're king over your wishes, then I'm queen over mine. I hope the house brings you luck — as for me, I'll be able to get by. The children can live or die, I leave that to you. I won't be here to see it, I'll feel no pain — when you don't see, the pain is gone!'

'So you think that if you don't look after this house I won't be able to? I could manage ten households like this all by myself!'

'You? If it falls apart in a month, remember, someone warned you!' After she said this, Kalyani, red in the face, wheeled about and walked to the door. Udaybhanu was an expert in the fine points of legal briefs but about the nature of women he knew very little. This is a science in which a man may grow old and still remain a novice. If even now he had shown a little tenderness, caught hold of Kalyani's hand and made her sit down, perhaps she would have stayed; but this could not come about by itself, so fate, moving in the opposite direction, took a different turn. He said, 'Have you got it in your head to go back to your father's house?' Kalyani stopped at the door, glaring at her husband, and said angrily. 'The people in my father's house are not the companions of my fate, nor am I so low as to sponge off them.'

'Then where will you go?'

'What right have you even to ask? In God's creation there's room for countless creatures, do you think there won't be for me too?'

With this, Kalyani left the room. In the courtyard she looked up at the sky once, as though calling the hosts of stars to witness how cruelly she was being forced out of this house. Eleven had struck. Inside all was quiet. The bed of her two sons was in her room. She went in and saw that Chandrabhanu was sleeping. The younger, Suryabhanu, was sitting up on the charpoy. As soon as he saw his mother he said, 'Where did you go, *Amma?*' Still standing some way off, Kalyani said, 'Nowhere, my dear, I was just with your father.'

'When you go away I'm scared. Why did you go, tell me?' With this he stretched out his arms to climb into her lap. Now Kalyani could not restrain herself. Her parched heart was flooded with the honied stream of maternal affection; the tender sprouts of that heart which had withered with her anger turned green once again. Tears came to her eyes. Lifting up the child to her bosom she said, 'Why didn't you call out, my darling?'

'I did, but you didn't hear. Tell me, now you won't go away any more, will you?'

'No, my sweet, now I won't go away.'

Saying this, she lay down on her charpoy with Suryabhanu.

Held tight by his mother and reassured, the child fell asleep. Kalyani began to ponder her alternatives. When she remembered her husband's words she felt like going away and abandoning her home. But if she glimpsed the children's faces she was overwhelmed with waves of affection. If she left, to whom could she entrust her offspring? Who would look after these children of hers, in whose care could they stay? Who would feed them milk and *halva*[8] morning and night, who would put them to bed and waken them? She could put up with anything for them — disgrace and disrespect,

[8] A sweet pudding made of flour or semolina or vegetables by frying them in clarified butter and then boiling in water or milk. Sugar, syrup and other condiments are added to taste.

malice and insults, threats and snubs, for their sake she could stand anything.

But if Kalyani had lain down with her child, Babu Sahib for his part could not sleep. Cutting words are hard to forget. Oof! What a disposition. Treating him as though he were the wife. How difficult even to utter a word! 'Am I supposed to just go on being her slave?' he thought. 'She thinks she can stay alone in the house and have everything else, hers or not, thrown out. She's destroying it! She's got herself thinking that if I happened to die she can get along in ease. What people think in their heart gets out, no matter how much they try to hide it. I've noticed for sometime now how nastily she's been talking. She must be counting on her folks, but nobody there will bother with her. Right now they're hospitable but when she goes there and tries to live off them she'll learn what's what. She'll come back weeping. What conceit! She thinks she's the only one who can run this house. But if I take off for somewhere for a few days she'll find out, all her boasting will turn to humiliation. Just let me break her pride for once, just let me give her a taste of being a widow. Where on earth does she get the nerve to curse me like that? It seems that love has had no effect on her, or she presumes I'm so attached to the family that no matter how much she abuses me there's no question of my leaving her. That's what it is, but I'm not a person to cling to this world. Let this house where you have to contend with such creatures go to hell. Is it a home or an inferno? When a man comes from work all tuckered out he finds some rest at home, but here instead of rest you have to listen to curses. She's praying for my death. This is the end of twenty-five years of married life. Enough! I'm off. When I see that all her conceit is wiped out and her temper's cooled down I'll come back. Four or five days should do the trick. There, you'll find out you've met your match!'

With these thoughts Babu Sahib got up, threw his silk shawl over his shoulders, took some money, pulled out his card and slipped it into the pocket of a different *kurta*[9], picked up his walking

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[9] Loose pullover shirt traditionally worn by Indians.

stick and quietly went out. All the servants were fast asleep. The dog, roused by his step. trotted off with him.

But no one could foresee that this whole little drama was being directed by fate. The ruthless stage director sitting inaccessible in some hidden place was presenting his cruel and tangled play. No one could foresee that the play-acting was going to become real and the pantomime would take on the shape of truth.

Night had overwhelmed the moon and established her reign. Her demonic army had spread terror over nature. Virtuous impulses hid their faces and evil strutted with the pride of victory. In the forest wild beasts roamed in search of prey while in the cities human demons hovered and went slinking about.

Babu Udaybhanu Lal walked toward the Ganges. He had decided to leave his *kurta* on the river bank and go to Mirzapur for five days. Finding the *kurta* people would assume that he had drowned. With his card in the pocket there would be no problem in establishing his identity. The news would spread quickly throughout the city; by eight in the morning the whole town would be crowding to his door — and then just what could Madam do?

With such thoughts in his head Udaybhanu was going on through the alleyways when suddenly he became aware of the sound of someone else's footsteps. He walked on but whatever alley he turned into the other person also turned. Suspecting that the man was following him with some mischief in mind, he suddenly pulled out his pocket flashlight and looked at the man in the light. It was a sturdy fellow with a *lathi*[10] over his shoulder. Udaybhanu was astonished at the sight of him. This was one of the best-known bad characters of the city who, three years ago, had been convicted of robbery. In the trial Udaybhanu had pleaded the case for the state and got him sentenced to three years in prison. The fellow had been thirsting for his blood ever since. He'd been released only yesterday and had come straight to town. Tonight when by chance Udaybhanu had appeared alone he had stumbled on a fine

[10]Long sturdy stick.

opportunity to settle accounts, such an opportunity as he might never have again. At once he'd begun to follow him and was just at the point of striking him from behind when the lawyer turned on his flashlight. Wavering a little, the hoodlum said, 'Don't you recognize me, *Babuji?* I'm Matai.'

'Why are you following me?' Udaybhanu demanded sharply.

'Why, can't a fellow walk in the streets? Does your father own this alley?'

Udaybhanu had wrestled in his youth and he was still a vigorous man nor did he lack courage. Wielding his walking stick he said, 'Maybe you haven't had enough yet — this time you'll get seven years!'

'I may get seven, I may get fourteen, but you won't be around to see it . Well, if you fall down at my feet and swear an oath that you wouldn't prosecute anybody anymore I'd let you go. Speak up do you agree?'

'Do you want to be finished off for good this time?'

'You're the one who's going to be finished off. Speak up, do you swear? One!'

'Get out of my way or I'll call the police.'

'Two!'

'Get out of my way, you bastard!' Udaybhanu shouted. 'Three!'

The very instant that syllable came out of his mouth he brought his staff down with such force that Udaybhanu fell to the ground, able to gasp only, 'You've killed me!' before he lost consciousness. Matai drew closer and saw that his skull was split and a stream of blood was flowing from it. There was no sign of a pulse. He realised that his work was accomplished. From the lawyer's wrist he took the gold watch, tore the gold buttons from his *kurta*, removed the ring from his finger and went his way as though nothing at all had happened, except that he was merciful enough to drag the corpse aside and fling it on the edge of the road.

Alas, the wretched man had gone forth with one intention and something quite different happened. Is there anything in the world more insubstantial than life! Is it not as transitory as a lamp which a mere puff of wind extinguishes? Consider a bubble — but even that lasts some little while. There's not even that much substance in life! One cannot rely on so much as a single breath, but on its so perishable base what vast designs do we construct out of our desires. We know not if the breath we draw in will come forth again or not, but we think, how far away all that is! — as though we were immortal.

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We shall not afflict the readers' hearts by recounting the widow's lamentation or the weeping of the children. One who bears a loss will cry and lament and swoon: there's nothing new in this. Oh, but if you please you may imagine the grievous mental anguish of Kalyani, who was left with the thought that she alone was the murderer of her husband. Those words which in the heat of anger issued from her intemperate mouth now pierced her heart like arrows. If her husband had departed from this world moaning on her bosom she would have been content, thinking she had carried out her duty towards him. For grieving hearts there's no greater consolation than this. With such a thought what great contentment there would have been — her husband pleased with her, in his final moment his heart filled with love! Kalyani did not possess this consolation. She thought, 'My twenty-five years of dedication have come to nought. I have been deprived of my dear husband's love at his last moment. Had I not spoken such harsh words he never would have left the house at night. Who can imagine what thoughts must have filled his mind?' So she fretted away the eight watches of the night and day, imagining Udaybhanu's feelings and magnifying her own misdeeds. The children for whom she would have sacrificed her life now vexed her; because of them only she had had to quarrel with her husband and now they were her enemies. The house, which had been as busy as a public court, was desolate now. The carnival had moved on.

Where there is no one to provide, how can the spongers hang around? Gradually, within a month, all those maternal and paternal nephews and nieces had taken their leave. The ones who used to claim that they lived with people for whom they were ready to give not just water but their very life's blood, now took to their heels without so much as a backward glance. The world had been turned upside down. The children who invited spontaneous affection were completely neglected now. Where had all that former splendour gone?

When Kalyani's grief had diminished the problem of Nirmala's marriage cropped up again. Some people advised Kalyani to postpone the marriage for this year. She said, 'If we postpone the wedding after so many preparations, then everything we've done will be utterly wasted and we'll have to start the arrangements all over again next year and that will be impossible. The best thing is to go ahead with the wedding. There's no further need for borrowing or spending. We've already got enough stuff together for housing and feasting the guests, a delay would only mean a great loss.' So along with the death notice a message to this effect was also sent on to Mr. Bhalachandra. In her letter Kalyani wrote, 'Take pity on this poor orphan and guide our sinking ship to the shore. My husband had very great ambitions but God has willed it otherwise. Now my honour is in your hands. The girl is already yours. I consider it my good fortune to welcome you hospitably, but if I fall short in any way or you find anything lacking, then considering my situation forgive me. I am sure that you yourself will not allow this orphan to be disgraced.'

Kalyani did not send this letter through the mail but instead asked the family priest, Moteram Shastri, 'I'm sorry to trouble you but you yourself must go and hand over this letter and say on my behalf, with great humility, that the fewer people that come the better it will be since now there's no one here to look after the things.' Moteram took the letter and arrived three days later in Lucknow.

That evening Babu Bhalachandra was reclining in an armchair outside the drawing room, bare bodied and smoking his *hookah*. He

was a tall, very corpulent man, who looked like a black giant or a negro brought from Africa. From head to toe he was of one single colour. His black face was so dark that one could not tell where his forehead ended and his hairline began. Enough to say that he was the living image of a piece of coal. He suffered much from the heat; two men stood by fanning him, despite which he was streaked with streams of sweat. He held a high position in the Excise Department, with a salary of 500 rupees. He took huge bribes from the contractors. The contractors could sell water as wine and keep their shops open twenty four hours a day just by keeping him pleased, for his pleasure was the only law.

He presented such a fearful figure that when people saw him on a moonlit night they were frightened, and not only the women and children, grown men too were scared out of their wits. I say a moonlit night for on a dark one no one could make him out at all, since blackness becomes invisible in total darkness. The only other colour on him was the red of his eyes. Just as a pious Muslim says his ritual prayers five times a day, so five times a day he drank liquor. Just as liquor is no longer taboo for the Muslim judge when it is free, so Bhalachandra as the official in charge of liquor might drink as much as he wanted with no one to restrain him. When he was thirsty, he drank. As there is a mutual harmony among colours, so is there also a mutual discord, and by conjunction with the redness of his eyes his blackness became even more fearful.

As soon as he saw Pandit Moteram, *Babuji* got up from the chair and said, 'Aha, it's you! What good fortune!' He yelled for the servants. 'Where have they all gone? Jhagru, Gurdin, Chhakauri, Bhavani, Ramgulam! Isn't anybody there? Have they all died? Get moving! Ramgulam, Bhavani, Chhakauri, Gurdin, Jhagru! They don't answer, you'd think they were all dead. There's a full dozen of them but when you need them not one shows his face, God knows where they've all disappeared. Here you, bring a chair for the guest!'

Babu Sahib called those five names several times, but neither of the two men moving the fan went out to get somebody to bring a chair. After some time a one-eyed man appeared, coughing and said

in the local dialect, 'Sir, we can't do that sort of work. We have to borrow money just to survive and we're all tuckered out just from pleading with you for our wages.'

'Stop jabbering and go and fetch a chair! Whenever he's told to do any work he starts jabbering. Tell me, *panditji*[11], are they all well over there?'

'Ah *Babuji,* how can one talk of being well?' said Moteram. 'The whole family's been struck down in the dust.'

By now the servant was bringing in a broken pine box. He set it down, saying, 'We can't drag in all the tables and chairs, you know.'

Embarrassed and afraid that it might break, Moteram sat down on it and handed over Kalyani's letter to Bhalachandra.

'What can be worse than this?' said Bhalachandra when he'd read the letter. 'What greater catastrophe can befall! I was friends with Babu Udaybhanu for a long time. He was no ordinary man but a gem! What a heart, what courage!' He wiped his eyes. 'It's as though my right arm had been cut off. Believe me, from the instant I heard this news it's as though my eyes were covered with darkness. If I sit down to eat I can't. His image is right before my eyes. I can't face the food and I just get up and leave it. I don't feel like doing anything at all. Grieving for a brother could not match the way I feel. He wasn't a man, I tell you, he was a gem!'

'Sir,' said Moteram, 'there's no gentleman like him left in town.'

'How well I know it, *panditji,* you're not telling me a thing. A man like him is one in a hundred thousand-two hundred thousand! I couldn't know anyone better than I knew him. After only two or three meetings I became his admirer and I'll stay one until my dying breath. Be good enough to inform the bride's mother how much I grieve.'

'This is exactly what I expected of you,' said Moteram. 'It's difficult to find a true gentlemen like you. For otherwise, who would agree to a marriage without a dowry?'

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[11] Respectful mode of addressing a priest.

'Oh sir,' said Bhalachandra, 'dowry is not discussed among such honest people. To be related to them is worth a hundred thousand rupees. I consider such a relationship my great good fortune. Yes! What a generous soul he was, he held money to be of no importance at all, he cared not a whit for it. It's an evil custom, excessively evil! If I had my way, I'd have anybody who took a dowry (or who gave either) shot, even if I'm hanged for it. I ask you, does one marry one's son off or sell him? If you have an itch to spend extravagantly for the boy's wedding, well, do so and enjoy it; but whatever you do, let it be according to your capacity! And what is this now, when they go murder the girl's father. How vicious, how dreadfully vicious! If I had my way I'd shoot the rascals.'

'I congratulate you, sir, the Lord has bestowed great wisdom upon you. Such is the glory of righteousness! The mistress desires that the time set for the wedding remain the same, everything else is written down in her letter. That's all there is to it. Only if you rescue us we'll be saved. We shall of course offer hospitality to the gentlefolk coming to the wedding; but the situation is now much changed, sir, as there's no one to manage it all. Enough! You understand: handle it so that no disgrace shall sully the name of Udaybhanu Sahib.'

Bhalachandra kept sitting a moment with his eyes closed, then he sighed deeply and said, 'God did not wish that Lakshmi to enter my house, for otherwise would this thunderbolt have fallen? All our plans have come crashing to the ground! I had scarcely been able to contain my joy that this auspicious occasion was drawing nigh, but how could I know that in God's house a conspiracy was being hatched? The very memory of those who have died is enough to make us weep, so just to *see* this girl would reopen the wound. In such a state I don't know what foolish thing I might do. Consider it a fault or a virtue in me, but once I have established a close bond with someone, his memory will never leave my mind. So the thing is now Udaybhanu's image keeps dancing before my eyes. But if that girl came into this house, it would be difficult for me to survive it! Believe me, I'd go blind from continual weeping. I know it's useless to grieve and lament, one who's died cannot come back. What can

one do except be patient? But I'm overwhelmed by my emotions — my heart would break just to see that orphaned girl.'

'You mustn't talk like that, sir,' said Moteram. 'Udaybhanu is no more, all right, but you're here. Now *you* are the equivalent of her father. She's no longer the lawyer's daughter but yours. Nobody knows the true feelings of your heart. People will assume that because of Udaybhanu's death you've gone back on your promise, and this will hurt your reputation. Be consoled and gladly, joyfully, see that this girl is married. You know the saying: the elephant may have died but it's still worth a fortune. A ton of misfortunes have fallen on her but the mistress will spare nothing to provide you people with hospitality.'

Bhalachandra now realised that Pandit Moteram was no mere bookish Brahmin but on the contrary one skilled in worldly ways. He said, *'Panditji,* I swear, I love this girl more than my own daughter. But if God has not willed it, what can I do about it? This death is a kind of warning from the Almighty, it's a prophecy of still worse things to come. The Lord is telling us that this marriage won't prove happy. In such a situation, just think, can something that's started out so inauspiciously end in happiness? Of course not, one doesn't deliberately do something that's wrong, does one? Tell my respected sister-in-law that of course I would be ready to carry out her command, but the result cannot be good, I wouldn't want to cause such an injustice to my closest friend's child simply because I was blinded by selfishness.'

This logic left Pandit Moteram utterly speechless. The adversary had let loose an arrow which he could not deflect, the enemy had struck and he was unable to offer a defence. He was still trying to think of a reply when Babu Bhalachandra once again began to call for the servants. *'Arrey!* Have you all run off? Jhagru, Chhakauri, Bhavani, Gurdin, Ramgulam! Not one of them answers, they've all gone and died. *Arrey!* Aren't you going to bother to bring something to drink for *panditji?* I don't know how long I can keep on trying to teach them anything, they've not an ounce of sense, any of them. They can see that a gentleman has come from far away, all

tired out but no one is the least concerned. Come on, you, bring *Panditji* some water! *Panditji,* shall I have some *sherbet*[12] made for you or shall I order fruit and sweets?'

Moteram recognised no dietary restriction of any kind in the matter of sweets. His theory was that whatever was made with *ghee* became pure.[13] He was wild about *rasgullas* and *laddus* made with gram flour, but he didn't in the least care for *sherbet,* and it was quite against his principles to fill his belly with water. With some hesitation, he said, 'I'm not accustomed to drinking *sherbet,* but I will take some sweets.'

'You mean fruit, I presume?' 'Well, I'm not really inclined to fruit.'

'So it's like that!' said Bhalachandra. 'Well, all this business about caste purity is mere sham, anyway, I don't bother with it myself. But still no one has come! Chhakauri, Bhavani, Gurdin, Ramgulam! Somebody speak up!'

Once again the same old servant came in coughing and stood there, saying, 'Sir, how about paying my wages? I can't go on working like this for nothing. How much running can I do? I've run so much my knees are beginning to hurt.'

'Whether you do any work or not you want your wages first! You lie around all day coughing, but all you have on your mind is wages. Go to the market and bring back one *anna's* worth of sweets. Don't walk, run!' After giving his orders to the servant Babu Sahib went into the women's quarters and said to Rangilibai, his wife, 'A Brahmin's come from *them* with a letter, read it for me.'

Rangilibai was fair with cheerful features. Youth and beauty had bid her farewell but like some loving friend hanging on stubbornly for 30 years they had not quite managed to get away from her. She had been sitting, preparing *pan.*[14] She said, 'You told him we wouldn't agree to the marriage, didn't you?'

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[12] Sweet non-alcoholic cold drink.

[13] Fruit is acceptable to a Brahmin but sweets from the market may have been prepared by someone of lower caste, hence taboo.

[14] Betel leaf.

'I did, but because I was embarrassed I didn't quite spell it out. I evaded with a few fibs.'

'Why be embarrassed about telling the truth? Our wish is not to have it. Have we accepted anything from anybody? When we can get ten thousand cash from another match why should we go ahead with this one? The lawyer's daughter's not made of gold, is she? If he'd stayed alive, then we could have shamed him into forking over fifteen or twenty thousand, but now — what do they have left with?'

'Refusing outright isn't a good thing. No one may say anything openly but we can't get out of it without hurting our good name. Still, if you insist, I shall have to go along with you.'

Rangilibai chewed a *pan* and began to read the letter. Babu Sahib was totally incompetent in Hindi and although Rangilibai had probably never read a book she could manage to get through a letter. When she read the first line her eyes grew moist and by the time she had finished the letter her tears were flowing copiously. In each word misery was evident. Rangilibai's toughness was not of stone but only painted on, melting away at the slightest heat. Kalyani's pathetic words completely melted her heart that was only masked with selfishness. Her voice choking, she said, 'The Brahmin's still sitting out there, isn't he?'

Bhalachandra was panic-stricken at the sight of his wife's tears. He was furious with himself for having shown her the letter to no good purpose. What need had there been for it? He'd never made such a terrible mistake. Doubtfully, he said, 'Possibly — though I told him to go.'

Rangili looked through the window. Pandit Moteram, hunched like a heron in deep meditation, was staring at the road to the market. Impatient with longing, he at times would shift from one side to the other. But that 'one *anna's* worth of sweets' had already dashed his hopes, and now on top of that this great delay. Dreadful situation! Watching him sitting there, Rangili said, 'He's still here, go and tell him we'll think about it. The poor woman has had such bad luck.'

'At times,' said Bhalachandra, 'you begin to talk quite childishly. I've already told him that I'm not willing to go ahead with the wedding. It took a lot of tedious explanation. If I go now and give him this message, what will he think of us in his heart? — Just give a little thought to that. This is a question of a marriage, not a child's game where you say one thing and do just the opposite. But you'll turn it into a joke, not a matter for grown-ups.'

'Very well, you won't have to tell him. Send this Brahmin to me and I'll explain it in such a way that it won't contradict what you've said, or what I want. You won't object to this, will you?'

'You think everybody except yourself is an idiot. Whether you tell him or I tell him, it's still the same thing. Once something's been agreed upon, it's agreed upon and I don't want to discuss it any further. You yourself said time and again that you wouldn't put up with a marriage with that family. Now you're switching around again. After all, you ought to have some concern for my honour and reputation.'

'But how could I know that the widow's situation had become so desperate? It was *you* who told me that she was hiding all her husband's wealth and was trying to go through with everything by pretending to be destitute. You said she was a crafty woman, and whatever you told me, I accepted. To do wrong by trying to do good is a matter for shame and embarrassment. But there's no shame in doing a good by righting a wrong. If you had said *yes* when I told you to say *no*, then it would have been proper for you to feel ashamed. But to say *yes* after having said *no* would bring you credit.'

'It may seem praiseworthy to you, but it strikes me as meanness. And anyway, how have you come round to thinking that what I said about the lawyer's wife isn't true? Just from reading this letter? You're simple in just the way you think other people are.'

'There's no faking in this letter,' said Rangilibai. 'Fake things don't pierce your heart. When it's fake, you can always smell it.'

'The falsehood affects one so much that compared to it what's true seems completely insipid. Are those writers of romance, whose

books you weep over for hours, writing the truth? They're creating all that fuss over something that's totally untrue. This too is an art.'

'What, still trying to get round me? Hiding pregnancy from the midwife! If I agree with you, you think you've got me fooled. But I know you through and through. You think you can shift the blame for your wickedness on to my head and get off white as a lily. Admit it, isn't what I'm saying true? While the lawyer was alive you figured there wasn't any need to fix things firmly because he himself would offer whatever he thought suitable as a dowry. In fact, you hoped to get even more by not settling it in advance. Now that he's dead you're dreaming up all kinds of pretexts and evasions. That's not a decent way to act, it's just pettiness. You're liable for remedying the situation. I won't have anything more to do with the marriage. Do whatever you wish. I'm fed up with frauds and hypocrites. Whatever you do, do it on your account, whether it's good or bad. There's not much virtue in following a morality of doing anything so long as you can get away with it. So tell me now: is this marriage going to take place or not?'

'After you've called me a cheat, dishonourable and a liar, what's the point of asking me? Oh, but you know people so well! What can one say of your depth of understanding! So just let me take the blame.'

'How modest you are! Even now you feel no shame. Tell me honestly, did I read you right or not?'

'Come off it, are there any women who understand men? Until now I always thought women understood things with great perceptiveness, but now that conviction's been shattered, I'm obliged to accept the verdict of the sages where women are concerned.'

'Just go look at your face in the mirror, believe me, and see how you're blushing. Just look!'

'Tell me honestly,' said Bhalachandra. 'Just how much am I blushing?'

'You're blushing as much as any gentleman caught stealing.'

'All right, so I'm blushing. But that wedding isn't going to take place.'

'What do I care?' said Rangili, 'Marry our son to whoever you want. And by the way, why haven't you asked even once about *him?*'

'Very well, leave the decision to him.'

'Only don't you try to influence him.'

'Of course not I won't even look at him.'

By chance at just this moment Bhuvan Mohan, their son, came into the room. In the colleges one rarely sees such good-looking, well-built, vigorous young fellows. He took after his mother completely, with the same fair complexion, the same lips, delicate as rose petals, the same broad forehead and large eyes, while his above-average height came from his father. He sported a high-collar coat, western trousers, necktie, boots and hat and carried a walking stick in his hand. In his step was the arrogance of youth, in his eyes self-confidence.

Rangili said, 'You're home very late today. Have a look at this, the letter's just come from your father-in-law's house. Your mother-in-law wrote it. Speak out plainly, the time's running out: are you willing to marry the girl or not?'

'I ought to marry her, of course, *Amma,*' said Bhuvan. 'But I won't.'

'Why not?'

'I'll marry anyone you arrange for me so long as it brings us lots of money. But nobody else, definitely. Where there's a chance of hundred thousand — but what does she have saved up? Now that lawyer's no longer alive how much could the old woman have?'

Rangili said, 'Aren't you ashamed to talk like that?'

'What's there to be ashamed of? Did rupees ever bite anybody? In a hundred thousand lives I could never pile up a hundred thousand rupees. I've only just passed my exams this year, so for at least five years I won't even get a glimpse of any money. Then I'll start earning one or two hundred a month. Three quarters of my life will be over by the time I earn five or six hundred. I'm never going to get another chance to gather in a pile. I won't be able to enjoy the

world. But if I should marry some rich girl I'll get along without any worries. This is all I want. A hundred thousand in cash, or else if we find some widow with a heap of property who's got just one daughter — that would do the trick.'

'No matter what kind of a woman she turns out to be?' Rangili asked.

'Money wipes away any and all defects. Even if I get reviled for it, I won't have any objections. If a cow gives a lot of milk who minds if she kicks?'

In a tone full of admiration, Babu Sahib said, 'Of course we sympathise with those people and feel sorry that God has put them in such a fix; but one has to reach a decision sensibly. No matter what reverses *we* may suffer, it will be a big enough marriage party. They can't even provide a proper meal. The only possible outcome would be that everybody would be laughing at us.'

'Father and son,' said Rangili, 'two chips off the same block. You're both willing to ruin that penniless girl!.'

'The penniless ought to marry the penniless,' said Bhuvan. 'If they try to push up beyond their status—'

'Shut up!' said Rangili. 'You're coming up with status now! What kind of wealthy big shot are you? If somebody came begging at your door he'd be lucky to get a pot of plain water. But now you've suddenly turned into a man with status!'

Saying this, Rangili got up and left them to go and see to the kitchen.

Bhuvan smiled and went to his room. Babu Sahib swaggered out arrogantly to give Moteram the final decision, but there was no sign of the Brahmin.

Moteram had waited for some time for the servant; when he was so delayed in returning, the Brahmin could not bear to sit there any longer. He thought, 'I won't get anywhere just sitting here, I ought to get busy. If I just stay put hanging around here trusting my luck I'll die of starvation. It's not going to work for you here!'

Quietly he picked up his staff and set out in the direction the servant had taken. The market was not far and he reached it in a moment. When he looked around he saw that the old fellow was sitting at a *halvai's*[15] shop smoking *chillum.*[16] As soon as he saw him, Moteram said without formality, 'So nothing's ready yet, you pot-scrubber! The master's sitting at home angry because he thinks you've fallen asleep somewhere or have started guzzling toddy. I told him, "Sir, that's not the case at all, the fellow is old, eventually he's sure to come along." What a very odd creature the master is! I can't figure out how his servants stick it out.'

'Except for me,' said the servant, 'up till now no one else has stayed on, nor will anybody. I haven't been paid for a year. He never pays anybody. If someone demands his wages, he starts abusing him and the poor fellow gives up his job and runs off. Those two who were fanning him are government servants, that's why they're still hanging around — he's entitled to two orderlies paid by the government, you see. And I keep thinking, "According to the way you insult me, that's the way I'll do my job." Ten years have gone by, one or two more are going to go by in the very same way.'

'Then you're alone?' Moteram asked him. 'But he called out the names of several servants.'

'All of them came and gave up and took off within two or three months. He still recites their names like a litany just to show how important he is. If you could find me a job somewhere, I'd take it.'

'Ah well, there are lots of jobs. People are looking for servants today without finding them. Now you're an experienced fellow, there wouldn't be any lack of jobs for you. Tell me, are there any free items here? The master asked me if they should make some *khichri*[17] for me or bake some fried bread, but I said, "Sir, he's an old man, it would be a lot of trouble for him to get my dinner ready, so I'll just have something brought from the market." He said, "Fine, you'll

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[15] Sweetmeat maker.

[16] The earthen bowl of a *hookah.* It can be detached from the *hookah* and smoked directly.

[17] A meal item made of rice, lentils and/or vegetables.

find him at a shop. There you can ask the shopkeeper if he has any good fresh food cooked in *ghee.*" The *laddus* look fresh. Weigh out a full *seer*[18] — I'll just step up, all right?'

Saying so, Moteram climbed up on the *halvai's* shop[19], sat down and began to enjoy the delicacies, eating to his heart's content. He wolfed down two and a half or three *seers.* While he ate he sang the praises of the *halva*-maker. 'My dear fellow, your sweets live up to the reputation of your shop. The people of Banaras don't know how to make *rasgullas,* though they make good *kalakand.* But yours are no less good. You don't get such delicacies just by throwing in the ingredients, a lot of skill is needed. '

'Do have some more, *Maharaj*[20],' said the *halvai.* 'Have some *rabri* on my suggestion, please.'

'I do not feel like it But give half a pound. '

'Why just half a pound. It's good stuff, so take a full pound.'

When he had feasted to his heart's content, *panditji* took a stroll around the market and returned to the house just as nine was striking. All was shrouded in silence; one lantern was burning. He spread his bedding roll out on the veranda and went to sleep.

The next morning, when according to his custom he rose at about eight, he saw Babu Sahib walking past. Seeing that *panditji* had awakened, Bhalachandra greeted him and said, *'Maharaj,* where did you go last night? I stayed up waiting for you till very late. We kept supper for you for a long time. When you didn't come, we had it put away. Did you dine or not?'

Said Moteram, ... 'I had a little something at the *halvai* shop.'

'Ah well, what kind of a meal can you make on sweets compared to good bread and lentils. You must have spent a good ten or twelve *annas* and still not filled your tummy. You're my guest, you know, so please let me pay for whatever you ate.'

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[18] A seer equals about one kilo.

[19] Old-style Indian shops are on raised platforms.

[20] Respectful mode of addressing a Brahmin.

'I ate at your very own *halvai's,* the one whose shop is in the corner.'

'How much did you have to pay?'

'It's charged to your account,' said Moteram.

'But tell me then just how much sweets you ate, otherwise later on they'll hike the bill, for the man's a cheat.'

'Well,' said Moteram, 'I ate about two and a half *seers* of sweets and half *seer* of *rabri.'*

With eyes opened wide Babu Sahib stared at *panditji* as though he had just heard something monstrous. Three *seers* would never make up the total purchase for a whole month at his house and this gentleman had made away with four rupees worth at one time. If the fellow stayed a few more days, he'd be bankrupt! Did the man have a stomach or the very pit of hell? Three *seers!* There has to be a limit! Distressed, he ran in to Rangili and said, 'Wait till you hear *this!* That reverend gentleman consumed three *seers* of sweets yesterday. Three *seers,* full three *seers* in weight!'

Astonished, Rangili said, 'But surely not, how could anybody eat up three *seers?* Is he a man or a bull?'

'He told me so himself: three *seers*. He must have eaten at least four *seers,* honestly weighed.'

'Does he have some devil in his belly?'

'If he stays on through today he'll gobble up six seers!'

'But why should he stay today?' said Rangili, 'We must answer the letter, give it to him and send him on his way. If he stays, then tell him plainly that he can't eat sweets gratis at our house. If we have to make *khichri,* it shall be made — otherwise he can just leave. People who think they'll get salvation by feeding such gluttons can feed them, but as for us we don't require that kind of salvation.'

But it turned out that *panditji* was sitting ready to depart, so Babu Sahib needed no special skill to handle the situation. He asked, 'Have you already made your preparations, *Maharaj?*'

'Yes, sir, I'm leaving now. I can get a train at nine, I believe.'

'Won't you consider staying through today?' As he said this Babu Sahib feared that this *Maharaj* might indeed stay on, and therefore he ended up his sentence with: 'But of course the people there must be waiting for you.'

'Oh,' said Moteram, 'one or two days more wouldn't matter. In fact, I'd had it in mind to take a ritual bath where the three rivers come together. But don't take it ill if I say that you people here in Lucknow don't have the least regard for Brahmins. I have clients who just wait for me to appear to learn what I command so they can carry it out. As soon as we reach their door they consider it a blessed good fortune and the whole household — from the youngest to the eldest — are absolutely frantic to welcome and serve me. Where one is not respected it's intolerable to linger for even a moment. There can be no well-being where the Brahmin isn't honoured.'

'But *Maharaj, we* surely have not committed any such offence.'

'No offence! Then what do you call an offence? Just a moment ago you went into your house and said that this gentleman had gobbled up three *seers* of sweets. Weighed to the ounce! Have you ever seen real eaters before? Just feed one once and your eyes will pop. There are men to be found so extraordinary that they can eat five whole *seers* of sweets and not even belch. I was invited to eat sweets; I'm no Brahmin mendicant who's come to stand begging at your door. I'd heard of your reputation before I came, but I didn't know that I'd have a hard time just getting something to eat. Well, anyway — may the Lord see to your well-being.'

Babu Sahib was so abashed that he couldn't get out a word. In his whole life he had never experienced such a scolding. He made up a lot of excuses—'We weren't talking about you, we were talking about another gentleman' — but *panditji's* anger was not pacified. He could tolerate anything except any reflection on his appetite. It's even more displeasing to a man to hear his appetite scorned than it is for a woman to hear her beauty slighted. Babu Sahib acknowledged this, but he was also filled with the dread that Moteram might stay. His miserliness had been exposed, there was no longer any doubt of that. It had been important to conceal his stinginess — he had left

no stone unturned in order to succeed in keeping it hidden. But he had failed — what was to happen had happened. He regretted that he had gone into the house to discuss the matter, and in a loud voice in the bargain. And this rogue had been listening attentively too; but what was the good of regretting it now? Who could say what inauspicious face he'd seen for such a calamity to befall him? If now Moteram left here angry then he'd go there and slander him and expose all his deceit. So now he simply had to shut the fellow up.

With these thoughts running through his mind he went into the house and said to Rangilibai, 'This rascal heard all we were saying. He's going off in a huff.'

'When you knew he was standing near the door,' said Rangili, 'why didn't you talk softly?'

'When trouble comes it never comes alone,' said Bhalachandra. 'How could I know he was at the door with his ears cocked?'

'I wonder what unlucky face you had sighted.'

'The villain was lying there right in front of me. If I'd known I wouldn't have so much as glanced that way. But now we'll have to give him something to appease him.'

'Oof, ' said Rangili, 'just let him leave. Since you don't have to go through with this marriage, why worry? Let him say whatever he wants.'

'He'll flay me alive! Look, just let me give him ten rupees on the pretext of a going-away gift — and let the good Lord never show us his inauspicious face ever again.'

Clenching her teeth with chagrin, Rangili took out ten rupees. Babu Sahib took them and set them down at Moteram's feet. In his heart *panditji* was saying, 'Damn you, you blood-sucking miser, I'll cause you trouble you won't forget. You think you can make a fool of me by giving me ten rupees! Better get rid of that delusion. I know you through and through.' He stuck the money in his pocket, gave his blessing and went on his way.

For a long time Babu Sahib stood reflecting. 'I can't tell,' he said to himself 'does he still think me a miser or have I covered it up successfully? Anyway, I just hope those ten rupees haven't been wasted!'

4

A serious problem now confronted Kalyani. For the first time following her husband's death, and with bitterness, she experienced the full difficulty of her situation. For an impoverished widow what greater calamity can there be than to have a young daughter on her hands? Boys can go to school barefoot, she could wash the dishes herself, they could get by with the very plainest food, they could spend their days in a hut. But an unmarried girl of marriageable age could not be left sitting around at home. Kalyani was so furious with Bhalachandra that she felt like going to him herself to tell him how vile she thought him, pull the very hair off his head, and say that he had gone back on his word and he was not his father's son. Pandit Moteram had spared no detail in recounting their treachery.

She was sitting full of anger about it when Krishna came playing and said, 'What day is the wedding to be, *Amma? Panditji's* come back, hasn't he?'

'Are you dreaming about the wedding?' Kalyani asked her.

'That, Chandar is saying the wedding's going to be in a few days. It will, won't it, *Amma?*'

'I've told you already — why do you keep pestering me?'

'There're weddings in everybody's houses, why don't we have one?'

'The one who was supposed to lead the wedding party to your house — well, his house has caught fire.'

'Really, *Amma?* Then his whole house must have burned down. Where can they live now? When sister goes away where will she stay?'

'Oh, you silly child, you don't understand it all. "Caught fire" means sister won't be married into that family.'

'But why, *Amma?* Wasn't it all settled before?'

'They're asking for lots of money. And I don't have any money to give them.'

'Are they very greedy, *Amma?*'

'I don't know what else you can call them. Regular butchers! Cruel, cheat...'

'Then, *Amma,* it's a very good thing that sister didn't get married to that family. How could she live with such people? We ought to be happy, *Amma,* so why are you sad about it?'

With love Kalyani looked at her daughter. How true what she'd said! In simple words, how touching a way of putting the problem! Truly it was something to be glad about that they wouldn't be linked to such vicious people, not at all a matter for sadness. God knows what poor Nirmala's fate would have been among such vile creatures; she would have bemoaned her fate. If a bit more of *ghee* got into the lentils, the whole house would be in an uproar. If the food was just a trifle overcooked what a fuss the mother-in-law would make! The boy too was just as avaricious. So it was a very good thing, otherwise the poor girl would be made to shed tears the rest of her life. When Kalyani stood up her heart had lightened.

Still, there had to be the marriage, and this year, if at all possible, otherwise next year she'd have to start the arrangements all over again from scratch. There was no longer any need of a well-placed family. How could the unlucky girl find a match in a well-placed family? So now somehow or the other she had to rid herself of this burden, somehow or the other get the girl settled — and ruin her life with a poor match. She was beautiful, virtuous, clever, of

excellent family — but none of it mattered. When there was enough dowry, all defects were virtues. A dowry had value, but not a life. How unfair were the tricks of fate!

Kalyani too had her shortcomings. For being a poor widow she could not free herself of her shortcomings. She loved her sons much more than her daughters. Boys are the bullocks who draw the plough, the first right to the fodder is theirs; whatever's left over from their food can go to the cows. She owned a house, had a little cash, jewellery worth several thousand — but she had to educate her boys. Yet another daughter would be ready for marriage in four or five years, and therefore she could not offer any great sum for dowry. After all, the boys ought to have something too! They had to be aware that they too had had a father.

Fifteen days had passed since Pandit Moteram's return from Lucknow. The next day he had set out in search of a bridegroom. He vowed that he would show those people in Lucknow that they were not the only ones in the world, that there were lots more, just as good, floating around. Kalyani began to count off the days. Today she decided to write him a letter and had just sat down with pen and inkpot when Pandit Moteram made his appearance.

'Come in, *panditji,*' she said. 'I was just writing you a letter. When did you get back?'

'This very early morning,' said Moteram. 'But at just that moment an invitation came from a merchant. For several days I haven't had any good things cooked in *ghee,* so I said to myself, since it's come along, let's take care of this first. I'm just coming from there now — there were about five hundred Brahmins being feasted.'

'Did you accomplish anything or didn't you have any luck?'

Kalyani asked him.

'Of course I succeeded, it was hardly a difficult job. I negotiated with five families and brought the particulars. Maybe you'll be pleased with one of them. Look at this one now: the boy's father has a job with the post office that earns him a hundred rupees a month. The boy is still studying in college. But he's confident about getting

a job. They don't have any property. The boy looks promising. And the family's good as well. They're asking for three thousand but we could settle it for two.'

'Does the boy have any brothers?'

'No, but there are three sisters and all the three are unmarried. The mother is alive. All right, now look at another. This boy earns fifty rupees a month from a job with the railways. Both his mother and father are dead. He's very handsome and well-mannered, and also well-built — he's an athletic young man. But his family is not good. Some were saying his mother was of the barber caste, some that she was a Rajput. His father was an agent in one of the princely states. He owns a little land, but he owes several thousand in debts. You wouldn't have to bargain with them. He must be about twenty.

'If only there weren't any blot on the family I'd accept him. But one shouldn't knowingly commit a sin, should one?'

'Then take a look at the third one. He's the son of a zamindar with an annual profit of about a thousand. They do some farming, too. The boy has very little education but he's clever at legal work. This will be his second marriage — his first wife died two years ago, and there are no children. But their style of living is not easy, there's nothing but hard work in that house.'

'Are they asking for any dowry?'

'Don't even ask!' said Moteram. 'They're saying four thousand. All right, look at the fourth one. The fellow's a lawyer, about thirty five, with an income of three or four hundred. His first wife is dead and he has three sons. He's had his own house built and bought himself some property. In this case also there's no question of having to bargain.'

'What sort of a family is it?'

'Very high class, of noble lineage. All right, consider number five. The father owns a printing press, the boy has studied up to his B.A., but works in the press. He must be about eighteen. Except for the press the family has no property but they owe no money. The family's neither very distinguished nor very mediocre. The boy is

good-looking and of good character. But they won't settle for less than a thousand. In fact, they're asking for three. Now tell me: which of these bridegrooms do you fancy?'

'Of them,' Kalyani asked him, 'which one do you prefer?' 'I like two of them: the one who works in the railways and the one who works in the printing press.'

'But you told me there was a blot on the first one's family.'

'Yes, there is. So then settle for the one from the printing press.'

'Only where will I get the thousand they're asking for? And one thousand is only your guess, maybe they'll demand more. You can see for yourself the condition of this house. If we get our meal to eat, we consider it good enough. Where will the rupees come from? The one with the land is asking for four thousand, the fellow in the post office wants two. We can forget about them. All right, that leaves only the lawyer. Thirty five isn't really all that old, so why not settle on him?'

'I advise you to think carefully about it. I'm your obedient servant, I'll see her formally engaged to whichever one you tell me. But don't be put off by that thousand, the boy in the printing press is a jewel. With him the girl's life will be fulfilled. The boy has quality and virtue to match his good looks and manners.'

'I like him too, *Maharaj*. But where is the money to come from? Who in the world will give it to us? The relatives who were staying here eating and drinking have vanished. Not a single person comes to show he cares for us, in fact, they all resent me, they feel I've thrown them out. Why should I beg for the impossible? Who doesn't love his children? Who doesn't long to see them happy? But one must have the wherewithal. In God's name make the engagement with the lawyer. He's a bit long in the tooth, but life and death are in the hands of fate. A man of thirty five isn't considered old. If it's the girl's destiny to enjoy happiness she'll be happy wherever she goes; if it's sorrow, then wherever she goes she must endure sorrow. Our Nirmala loves children. She'll consider his children her own. So find the auspicious moment and fix the engagement.'

5

Nirmala was now married and had come to her husband's house. Munshi Totaram was a lawyer, a swarthy, stocky fellow of no more than forty, though the demanding profession of the law had turned his hair gray. He had no leisure for exercise and would not even go walking anywhere; consequently, he had developed a paunch. Despite his sturdy frame he suffered continually from some complaint or other, and was constantly afflicted with indigestion and haemorrhoids.

He had three sons. Mansaram, the oldest, was sixteen, Jiyaram twelve and Siyaram seven. All three were studying through the English medium. Apart from Totaram's widowed sister, Rukmini, who was past fifty, there was no other woman in the house. Rukmini, who had not kept up any connection with her late husband's family and had settled permanently with her brother, was the mistress of the household.

Totaram was an expert on conjugal life. For whatever he lacked he intended to make up with gifts to please Nirmala. Although he was by nature exceedingly frugal, every day he would bring her some little present or other. When the occasion demanded it, he ceased to worry about money. While the boys would get only a little milk to drink, for Nirmala there was no shortage of delicacies — dried fruits, sweets, jellies. And although in his whole life he had never before gone in for jaunts and entertainment but now on holidays he

would take Nirmala to films, the circus or to the theatre. He now made a habit of spending a little of his valuable time sitting with Nirmala and listening to the gramophone.

But for some reason or other Nirmala felt shy about chatting and joking with Totaram. It may have been that her father had been so much like Totaram, that is, a man before whom she was accustomed to lower her gaze and conceal her body. Now this man who so resembled him was her husband. She considered him a person she ought to treat with respect rather than love. As soon as she caught sight of him all her natural high spirits would vanish and she would try to avoid him.

Totaram's study of conjugal art had taught him that one ought to speak constantly of love to a young woman — one should, as it were, take one's heart out before her. It was the key to win her over. And so he spared no effort in declaring his love to her. But his amorous talk repelled Nirmala. The very words which, if she had heard them spoken by a young man, she might have found intoxicating struck her heart like arrows when issuing from the lawyer's mouth. In them there was neither savour nor joy nor passion, but only artifice, deception and dry, insipid affectation. She had no objection to perfumes and lotions, dressing up and primping, shows and excursions; she objected only to sitting close to Totaram. She did not want to let him observe her youthful beauty because he did not have the proper eyes to look at it; she judged him unworthy to savour those charms. The bud blooms at the touch of the morning breeze: they have the same freshness. For Nirmala that morning breeze was missing!

As soon as the first month had passed Totaram entrusted the household finances to Nirmala. On coming back from court he would hand over his whole day's earnings to her, fancying that Nirmala would be thrilled to see all those rupees. And in fact, Nirmala found great delight in carrying out this function and kept a record of every single *paisa*. If sometimes the amount was smaller she would ask, 'Why is it less today?' And she would discuss at length with him everything relating to managing the house. She

considered him capable of discussing *those* matters only. But as soon as he said anything in a more light-hearted vein her face would cloud over.

Whenever she stood before the mirror, covered with jewels and richly dressed, and regarded the luminous reflection of her beauty, her heart would beat with intense longing, she would feel as though a flame were blazing inside her. She felt she would like to burn the whole house down. She was stirred with deep resentment against her mother but most of all against poor, blameless Totaram and this resentment came to obsess her. A dashing cavalier would rather go on foot than mount a wretched mule, and Nirmala was like that cavalier. She yearned for a horse on which she could fly, she longed to revel in its exultant lightning speed. But for such a mount, whinnying and with his ears pricked up, she had no hope.

She might have forgotten her sorry situation for a little while by finding some diversion playing and laughing with the children. But Rukmini would not let the boys stray from her side, as though Nirmala were some witch who might gobble them up. Now this Rukmini had an exceedingly peculiar character. It was no easy matter to determine what was going to please her and what would arouse her ire. The very thing that had delighted her on one occasion would, the next time, send her into a rage. If Nirmala stayed in her room she would say, 'God knows where the wretched woman's hiding.' If Nirmala went out on the balcony or spoke to the maids, then Rukmini would beat her breast. 'Neither modesty nor shame! The wicked thing has cast off every shred of decency. I wouldn't be surprised if in a matter of days she'll be dancing in the market place.'

Ever since the lawyer had begun to hand over his earnings to Nirmala, Rukmini was bent on criticising her. She felt that doomsday was round the corner.

As it happened, the children always needed small sums. While Rukmini had been mistress of the house she used to gratify them. But now she would send them straight to Nirmala, who was annoyed by the children's greedy appetite. Occasionally she would

refuse to give them any money at all, thus offering Rukmini an occasion to launch her verbal attacks against her. 'Well, now she's in charge — what does she care if the children stay alive or not? Who's around to look after the children without a mother? They used to be fed rupees' and rupees' worth of sweets but now they have to beg for every penny.' If Nirmala gave them some money without asking Rukmini would have a different objection. 'Of course she doesn't give a damn if the boys live or die. Without a mother who can explain to them that they shouldn't stuff themselves with sweets? And what does she care, if something bad happens, I'll be held responsible.'

If it had stopped at this Nirmala might have tolerated it, but Rukmini kept tabs on her like a secret police agent. If Nirmala went up to the balcony Rukmini was sure it was to check up on somebody; if she stopped to talk to one of the maids then of course it was to slander her. If she ordered something from the market then surely it could only be some frivolous trifle. Rukmini tried every chance she got to read her letters and constantly eavesdropped on her. Unnerved by this double-edged sword suspended over her, Nirmala finally said to her husband one day, 'Won't you please say something to your sister about the way she keeps after me?'

Totaram flared up. 'Has she been nasty to you?'

'Everyday. I can hardly get a word back at her. If she's angry because I've become the mistress, then give her the money, I don't need it, let her continue to be in charge. All I want from her is not to be sarcastic and keep on criticising me.'

With this Nirmala began to cry. Totaram figured he had come upon an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his love for her. He said, 'I'll give her a good talking to this very day. I'll let her know that if she wants to keep her mouth shut I'll let her stay here, otherwise she can move out. She is *not* the mistress of this house, you are. Her place is only to give you a helping hand. If she bothers you instead of helping you, she doesn't have to go on living with us. I had thought, well, she's a widow, she has no parents, she won't eat much, so let her stay. While extra servants would have cost me

money, *she* was my sister and I needed a woman to look after the boys, so I kept her on here. But that didn't mean that she was to lord it over you.'

Nirmala said, 'She teaches the boys to go and ask "Mother" for money, this or that. They are pestering me to death, I can hardly get a few minutes to myself for rest. If I scold them, she comes running with blazing eyes. She says I get jealous at the very sight of them. God knows how much I love those children! After all, they're my children too — why should I be jealous of them?'

Shaking with anger, Totaram said, 'Just beat anyone of those kids who gives you a hard time! I can see that those brats are turning out to be no good. I'll send off Mansaram to a boarding school and I'll straighten out those other two right now.'

At that moment Totaram was on his way to the law court so he had no opportunity for scolding. But as soon as he came back to the house he went straight to Rukmini and said, 'Well, sister, do you wish to live in this house or not? If you want to stay here then don't cause trouble and don't make it hard for others to get along here'.

Rukmini realised that her sister-in-law had finally struck back. But she was not the sort who gives in. First of all, she was much older and then she had spent a lifetime in the service of this very household. There was nobody in the world strong enough to force her out. Astonished at her brother's meanness, she said, 'Well then, do you want to keep me on as a servant? If that's the only way I can stay on here, well — don't think I'm going to be a slave in this house! If you want me to stand around while somebody sets fire to the house or keep silent while I see somebody going wrong, if you expect me to turn into a clay statue to please everybody, then you can forget it! What's happened to you? Have you gone out of your mind? All your common sense has flown out of the window, a mere chit of a girl's got you dancing on a string! You don't question, you don't object — she just shoots her arrow and you jump up and pull out your sword just like a little tin soldier.'

'But I hear you're always finding fault with her, saying sarcastic things,' Totaram answered. 'If you expect to teach her anything you

ought to do it with affection and gentle words. Instead of teaching, harsh words do just the opposite and make her resentful.'

'So what you really want is for me to say nothing about anything! All right, but later on don't tell me, "You just stood by — why didn't you give some advice?" If you think anything I say is poison, well, I'd be crazy if I didn't keep my mouth shut. You know the old saying, "Oxen for the plough, brides for the house." Well, we'll see how this bride runs the house.'

In the meantime, Siyaram and Jiyaram had returned from school. No sooner had they come in than they went to their aunt and asked for something to eat. Rukmini said, 'Why don't you go and ask your new mother? I'm not allowed to say or do anything, you know.'

'You boys are up to no good,' said Totaram. 'If you so much as set foot in her room I'll break your legs.'

Jiyaram, who was rather impudent, said, 'You won't speak to *her,* you just threaten us. And she won't give us any money.'

Siyaram confirmed this. 'She says, "If you bother me I'll cut off your ears." She does, doesn't she, Jiya?'

From her room Nirmala called out, 'When did I ever say I'd cut your ears off? Now you've started lying!'

As soon as he heard this Totaram caught hold of Siyaram by both ears and lifted him up off the floor. The boy shrieked and burst into tears. Rukmini ran up, snatched the child out of Totaram's hands and said, 'That's enough now, let him alone. Do you mean to kill the boy? My God! His ears have gone scarlet. What I've always said is true, when a man takes a new wife he goes blind. With things in such a state from now on only the good Lord can save this house.'

Nirmala had at first been thoroughly pleased with her triumph, but when Totaram picked the child up by his ears she was beside herself. She ran out to rescue him, but Rukmini was there before her. The older woman said, 'First you start the fire, now you come running to put it out. When you have children of your own, your

eyes will be opened up. People care only about their own grief, never somebody else's.'

Nirmala said, 'What do you mean I started trouble? He's right here, ask him. All I said was, the children keep pestering me for money. If I said anything else may I be struck blind.'

'For sometime,' said Totaram, 'I've been observing how naughty these brats are — do you think I can't see for myself! All three are getting stubborn and nasty. As for his lordship Mansaram, I'll pack him off to a hostel this very day.'

Rukmini protested, 'Until now you've never been able to find fault with any of them — how come your eyes have become so sharp all of a sudden?'

'*You're* the one who made them impudent!'

'So now I'm to blame for everything! So it's only because of me that your house is coming apart at the seams! Then listen: I'm finished with it. From now on whether there's murder or mayhem, don't expect me to say another word.'

With this she went off to her own part of the house. Nirmala, seeing the child still sobbing, was distressed. She hugged him to her breast, carried him to her room and began to soothe him. But the child wept more than ever. His innocent heart did not find in this affection that maternal love of which fortune had deprived him. This was not love but merely pity, something over which he had no authority, a thing which was being handed out to him as alms to a beggar. In earlier days while his mother was still alive, his father had beaten him once or twice; but then, afterwards his mother did not hug him close and shed tears over him. Being displeased, she would simply leave off speaking to him for a while until eventually, after a little time, he would forget all about it and go running to her in his usual way. He could understand being punished for doing something wrong. But to be caressed after being beaten was beyond his comprehension.

In his mother's love there had been harshness but tenderness was mingled with it. In this affection there was compassion but

none of that harshness which is a coded message of deep caring. No one is concerned about a healthy limb, but when that limb begins to throb with some hurt one tries to save it from the pain and ache. Nirmala's tears of pity had proclaimed to the child his orphanhood. He stayed crying in Nirmala's lap and still in tears he finally fell asleep. When Nirmala wanted to set him down, still sleeping, on the cot, the child in his state of somnolence threw his two tender arms around her neck and clung to her as though there were some abyss beneath him. His face was contorted with suspicion and fear. Unable to get him to sleep on the cot, Nirmala again pressed him close to her. This time, with the child secure in her lap, she experienced a satisfaction such as until now she had never known. Today for the first time she felt that personal anguish without which one's eyes cannot open and one cannot discern the path of one's duty. That path now began to be apparent to her.

6

That day, after giving such forceful proof of the depth of his love, lawyer Totaram hoped that he would win over Nirmala's inmost heart. But this hope was in no way fulfilled; on the contrary, while earlier she had been accustomed on occasion to share his laughter, now she was wholly preoccupied with looking after the children. Whenever he came home he would find her sitting with them, feeding them or dressing them, playing or telling them some story. Nirmala's thirsting heart, despairing of finding love, had come to regard her refuge in this activity as the only worthwhile thing in her life. She felt such embarrassment, distaste and disinclination in talking or joking with Totaram that she longed to spring up and run away from him. In contrast, her mind was made happy by the simple, honest affection of the children. Formerly Mansaram had hesitated to approach her, but now even he occasionally came to sit with her. He was the same age as Nirmala, but psychologically five years younger. Hockey and football were his world, the free realm of his imagination and the verdant garden of his aspirations. He was a good-looking boy, slender, cheerful and rather shy; his only link with the house was mealtime; all the rest of the day he was out wandering somewhere or other. When Nirmala listened to him talking about his games and sports she would forget her worries for a little while and wish that the time might come again when she was playing with dolls and her marriage was only being worked out, that time which had only recently come to an end.

Like other self-centred men Munshi Totaram was a materialistic creature. For a few days now he continued to take Nirmala to entertainments and out for walks. But when he saw that this produced no results, he resumed his solitary ways. After a full day of difficult mental exertion his inclination was for pleasure and relaxation; but when he entered his pleasure garden and saw his blossoms withered, the plants dry and dust hovering over the flowerbeds, he felt disposed to dig the whole garden up. Nirmala remained detached from him, he could not get at the heart of her mystery. He had tried out all the formulae of conjugal art, but his desire had not been fulfilled. At this point he could not figure out what he ought to do.

One day he was sitting deep in these thoughts when his crony Nayansukh Ram came and sat with him. After an exchange of greetings, Nayansukh smiled and said, 'These days you must really be enjoying your *bhang*[21]. When your new wife embraces you I guess you must be enjoying the delights of youth. How fortunate you are! My own life has become an affliction. My good wife sticks to me like a leech, I can't get her off my back. I'm thinking about taking a second wife. If there's some way to do it, then make the arrangements for me. Then some day, according to the custom, I'll offer you *pan* which she herself has made.'

Totaram, very serious, said, 'Don't do anything so foolish — if you do you'll regret it. Wenches are content only with young lads. You and I aren't good for that sort of thing any more. I'm telling you the truth: I'm sorry I ever got married. I'm stuck in a rotten situation. I'd thought I could enjoy life to the full for another few years, but I've got myself into a mess.'

'What are you talking about? What's so hard about getting the upper hand with wenches? You just show them a good time, praise their looks and their complexion, that's all there is to it! — and you have them under your thumb.'

'I tried all that — but it didn't work.'

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[21] Intoxicant.

'I see. Well, have you treated her to perfumes and lotions, flowers and fine fruit?'

'Oh yes, I've already been through all that. I tried out all the techniques in the marriage handbooks, but they're all pure nonsense.'

'All right then,' said Nayansukh, ' take one bit of advice from me. Just have your face done over. Nowadays there's an electricity doctor here who removes all the signs of old age. There won't be one wrinkle left on your face or one gray hair on your head. I don't quite understand what magic he uses to accomplish this, changing a man's physical appearance.'

'How much does he charge?'

'As for that, I've heard he asks quite a bit, maybe five hundred rupees.'

'Oh well, he must be some charlatan out to fleece the fools. He probably smears on some unguent so your face would get sort of smoothed out for a few days. I have no confidence in doctors who advertise. If it were a matter of five or ten rupees I'd say, all right, just as a joke, you know. But five hundred rupees is a mighty big sum.'

'For you five hundred is no great amount. A week's salary! My friend, if I had five hundred rupees this would be the first thing I'd do. Just one hour of youth is worth far more than five hundred rupees.'

'Come now,' said Totaram, 'give me some cheaper remedy, some mendicant's herbs so I can get it cheap.[22] Electrical treatment and radium are for important people and I wish them luck with it.'

'Then create an illusion of colour and gaiety. Get rid of that loose shapeless coat, put on a tight-fitting jacket of fine muslin, creased trousers, hang a gold chain around your neck, put on a good Jaipur turban, shadow your eyes with kohl and put henna in your

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[22] *bina harar phitkari ke rang chokha ho jay,* literally, 'so the complexion may become clear without alum or myrobolan,' but also an idiom meaning to get something for nothing.

hair. You've got to get rid of that pot-belly too, so tie a double sash around your waist. It will feel a little uncomfortable but the jacket will look just fine. I'll dye your hair for you. Memorize a hundred and fifty *ghazals*[23] and learn couplets for every possible occasion. Let your talk be full of amorous sentiment, that way she'll know you don't give a damn about this world or the next, the beloved is all that matters. Look for opportunities to do heroic and gallant deeds. In the middle of the night set up a false cry of 'Thief, thief!' and grab your sword and rush out to the attack alone. Only of course make sure you've already had a look around so there won't really be any thieves you're running after, otherwise all your faking will be exposed and you'll be made an ass all for nothing. When there is a thief, heroism consists in keeping absolutely quiet so that she'll think you're not aware of him, but as soon as he's run away you leap up and dash out with your sword shouting, 'Where is he? Where is he?' Nothing more than this — try out my advice for just one month and you'll see. If she doesn't start to sing your praises, then punish me anyway you please.'

At that time Totaram laughed off Nayansukh's advice as a worldly-wise man should, but some of it stuck in his mind. There was no doubt that it would be effective. He began to change his style, very gradually so as not to shock people. He began first with his hair, then it was the turn of the kohl, to such an extent that in one or two months his physical appearance was quite altered. The proposal to memorize *ghazals* was absurd, of course, but making some show of heroism could not do any harm.

From the moment he started finding excuses to bring up the topic of his valour every day, Nirmala began to suspect that he might be going insane. It's not surprising is it if one suspected madness in the swagger of a fellow who, when he ate green lentils and two *phulkas*[24] made of coarse flour required a digestive powder. As for the other feeling this madness produced in Nirmala, well, she began to pity him, and her sense of anger and disgust disappeared. One

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[23]Urdu songs composed of couplets, usually romantic.

[24]Home made dry roasted bread.

feels anger and disgust only for someone in his right mind, while a mad man is an object only of compassion. She ridiculed everything he said, and laughed at him, as people are wont to do with mad men, but she made sure that he didn't catch on. She thought, 'The poor fellow is expiating his sin; this whole posture is just so I can forget my own sorrow. After all, fate cannot be changed, why should I make this poor fellow angry?'

One evening at nine o'clock Totaram, in his new dandified get up, returned from a walk and said to Nirmala, 'Today I confronted three thieves. I was just walking along toward Shivpur. It was completely dark. Just as I came along near the railway track three men with swords suddenly appeared from nowhere. Believe me, all three were regular black demons! I was all alone and I just had this walking-stick in my hand. I thought, my life is about to come to an end, but I also thought, if I'm to die then why shouldn't I die a hero's death? Meanwhile one man challenged me and said, "Hand over whatever you've got and then take off without any noise."

'I grasped my stick, stood straight and said, "All I've got is this stick, and its price is one man's broken skull!"

'I'd hardly got the words out of my mouth when the three of them drew their swords and sprang at me and I began to fend off their blows with my stick. They became enraged and kept on hitting — the banging and clanging was tremendous — while I, quick as lightning, kept striking back and fending off their blows. For a good ten minutes the three displayed all their prowess with the sword but they didn't even nick me once. Unfortunately, I was limited by not having a sword of my own. If I'd had one I wouldn't have left one of them alive. Well, what more can I say about it? This time my dexterity was worth seeing. Even I was surprised that I could be so agile. When they saw that they were not going to get anywhere with me they put their swords back in their sheaths and patted me on the back and said, "Stout lad, we've never seen a hero like you before. The three of us are a match for a hundred. We go on the rampage through one village after another and pick them clean, but today you've shown us up. We acknowledge you as the better man." After they said that, they disappeared.'

With a grave smile Nirmala said, 'There must be a lot of nicks from their swords on your walking-stick.'

Munshiji was not prepared for this suspicion, but since it was necessary to give some kind of answer he said, 'Time after time I was able to get out of the way of their thrusts. They did hit my stick a few times but at an angle so that they couldn't leave any mark.'

He had not got the whole sentence out of his mouth when suddenly Rukmini Devi came on the run, panting and all bewildered, crying, 'Tota! Is Tota here or not? A snake's gotten into my room and it's all coiled up under my bed. I got up and ran — the wretched thing must be over two yards long. It was spreading its hood and hissing, oh, please go, take your stick and go after it!'

Totaram turned pale. All in a panic, he still managed to hide his emotion and say, 'A snake here? Where? Sure you're not mistaken? It must just be a piece of rope.'

'Come on now, I saw it with my own eyes,' Rukmini said. 'Please go and look. Good God, you a man and afraid?'

Munshiji came out of the house, but on the veranda he hesitated. He could not even move his legs, his heart was pounding. The cobra is a very ill-tempered creature. If once he bites you, you're obliged to give up your life for no very good reason. Munshiji said, 'I'm not afraid, it's only a snake, after all, not a tiger. But a stick is no good against a cobra, so I'll go and send somebody to get a spear from one of the neighbours.'

With these words Munshiji made a dash outside. At that time, Mansaram was eating. After Munshiji had left, he finished his meal, took up his hockey stick and went into Rukmini's room. Swiftly he yanked the charpoy away. Maddened, the snake, instead of slipping away, reared itself up with hood outspread. Mansaram swiftly yanked the spread off the charpoy and tossed it over the cobra, then whacked it several times in quick succession with his stick. The snake could only twist and squirm under the cloth. Then Mansaram hoisted up the snake on his stick and came outside, just as Munshiji was arriving with several men. When he saw Mansaram coming

along dangling the snake he let out a shriek, but then he regained his composure and said, 'But I was on the way, why did you act so fast? Give it over, one of the servants can get rid of it. '

He said this maintaining a brave front, then went and stood in Rukmini's doorway, surveyed the room, after which he went strutting to Nirmala and said, ' By the time I got there Mansaram had already killed it. The foolish kid went running with his hockey stick. A snake should always be dispatched with a spear, so this was an error on the boy's part. How many snakes just like this one I've killed! I actually play with them before I despatch them. How many I've grasped in my fist and crushed to death!'

Rukmini said, 'Go on now, I know all about your bravery.'

Munshiji was piqued. 'Very well,' he said, 'then I'm just a coward. I'm not asking for any reward from you, am I? Go and tell the cook to bring our dinner.'

So Munshiji went to dine and Nirmala, standing in the doorway, was thinking. 'Oh Lord! Is there really something seriously wrong with him? Do you want to make my situation even more awful? I can serve him, I can offer my life at his feet, but I can't do what can't be done for me: I can't do anything about the difference in our ages. What does he want from me, after all? I understand — I hadn't understood it before — otherwise would he have had to go through all this trouble, why else would he have had to put on such an act?'

7

From that day on Nirmala began to change her whole demeanour. She decided to throw herself body and soul into her duty. Until now in the depths of her despair she had given hardly any thought to it. In her heart a sort of flame of rebelliousness had kept burning, and its intolerable anguish had rendered her insensitive.

Now the intensity of that anguish had begun to wane. She accepted that there was to be no happiness for her in life, so why should she ruin her existence by dreaming of happiness? Not everybody in the world, after all, was sleeping on a bed of flowers. And she was one of those unfortunate ones who wasn't. The Creator had chosen her to bear a burden of sorrow, and that burden could not be taken off her shoulders. She might long to cast it off but she could not. Darkness might dim her eyes because of the weight of it, her shoulders might give way, she might not be able to move her feet another step, but she would have to bear the burden. How long could a person condemned to life imprisonment go on weeping? Since weeping would make the situation even worse, he would only have to suffer still more torments.

So the next day when the lawyer came home from court he saw Nirmala standing at the door, meeting him with a smiling face. At the sight of her flawless beauty, his eyes were satisfied. Today, after so long a time, this lotus appeared to him in full bloom. In the room a rather large mirror was hung on the wall; the curtain that usually

covered it had been drawn up today. When the lawyer stepped into the room his glance fell on the mirror and his image appeared to confront him. It was as though he had been struck in the heart. After a whole day of work the lustre of his face had dimmed. Despite his having consumed all sorts of nutritious foods the wrinkles of his cheeks were clearly visible. His paunch, despite being belted in, pushed out like a horse that could not be restrained. Nirmala was also standing before the mirror, but looking in a different direction. What a difference between those two images! One was like a splendid jewel-studded palace, the other a heap of ruins. He could bear to look no longer, his wretched appearance was intolerable. He drew away from the mirror, beginning to hate his own image. So it was not surprising if this beautiful young woman began to hate him. He had not even the courage to look directly at Nirmala, for this matchless beauty of hers had become a sore in his heart.

Nirmala said, 'Why have you come home so late today? All the day I've tired myself waiting for you.'

Totaram, staring at the window, answered, 'I scarcely had time to breathe because of this trial. There was still one more case, but I got away on the pretext of a headache.'

'Then why do you take so many cases?' Nirmala asked him. 'One ought to work only to the limit one can handle easily. You don't accomplish anything working yourself to death. Just don't take those cases, I'm not greedy for more money. If you'll take it easy you'll get plenty of money.'

'My dear, one doesn't spurn the incoming Lakshmi.'

'If the goddess of fortune comes by the offering of blood and sweat, let her not come at all. I'm not hungry for wealth.'

At this moment Mansaram also came back from the school. Due to walking in the sun there were drops of sweat on his flushed face. A kind of light seemed to flash from his eyes. He stood at the door and said, *'Ammaji,* can you get me something to eat? I have to go back to play again.'

Nirmala went and brought him a glass of water and put some fruit on a dish and gave it to him. When he had eaten and was about to leave, Nirmala asked him, 'When will you be back?'

'Can't say,' he answered. 'There's a hockey match with the British. Their barracks are a long way from here.'

'Come soon, my dear,' said Nirmala. 'If your meal gets cold then you'll say you're not hungry.'

Mansaram looked at Nirmala with simple affection and said, 'If I'm late you can assume I've eaten there. There's no need to wait for me.'

When he left, Nirmala said, ' In the beginning he hardly came into the room, he was shy of speaking to me. If he needed anything he'd ask from outside to have it sent out to him. But since I asked him to he's begun to come to me.' Rather vexed, Totaram said, 'Why does he come asking you for things to eat and drink? Why doesn't he ask my sister?'

Nirmala had said what she had out of a desire for praise. She wanted to show how much she cared for his children. This was no pretended love, she truly felt affection for the boys. Until now the childish emotions were predominant in her character. She had in her the same eagerness, the same playfulness, the same love of fun, and with the boys these childlike impulses of hers had found an outlet. As yet she had no inkling of a husband's easily aroused jealousy where his wife was concerned. But not understanding the reason why her husband, instead of being pleased with her was scowling, she said, 'How do I know why they don't ask her? If they come to me I'm not going to scold them. If I did, they would think I'm jealous of the boys.'

Munshiji did not reply to this, but today he did not discuss matters with his clients. He went to Mansaram and began to interrogate him. This was the first occasion in his life when he had demonstrated so much interest in the subject of Mansaram's or any of his children's progress in education. He had never found the leisure to take any time off from his work. It was about forty years

since he'd studied any of those subjects; since that time he'd never given them so much as a glance. He read nothing except legal books and documents — he did not even have enough time for that. But today he went to quiz Mansaram in those very subjects. Mansaram was both intelligent and industrious. Despite being captain of the B team at games he continued to rank first in his class. Whatever lesson he'd studied remained as though engraved in the stone for him. In his haste Munshiji could not think up any question so complex that a clever boy would have to think very hard to answer and Mansaram disposed of his father's questions in a trice.

As he listened to each of Mansaram's answers Munshiji got furious in just the same way that a soldier gets angry and returns to the assault even more violently when he sees that his blows have no effect on the enemy. He longed to ask the kind of question that Mansaram would not be able to answer. He wanted to find out where his weak side lay. Having found out now what Mansaram could do he was not pleased; he wanted to learn just what he could not do. Any experienced examiner would have shown up Mansaram's weaknesses with ease, but how could the lawyer manage it, aided only by the forgotten education, half a century old? Finally, when he was unable to find any pretext to soothe his anger, he said, 'I can see that you spend the whole day just loafing around. I realise that your natural inclinations are more powerful than your intellect, but I simply cannot tolerate your wandering about like a vagabond.'

Not in the least daunted, Mansaram said. 'Except for one hour for playing in the evenings I don't go anywhere the whole day. Just ask *Amma* or *Buaji*[25]. I myself don't like to loaf. But when the Headmaster calls me and insists on my playing I have to. If you don't like my taking part in sports, then from tomorrow I won't play.'

Seeing that matters had taken quite a different course, Munshiji said sharply, 'How can I believe that except for sports you don't just loaf around? I keep hearing complaints about you.'

Aroused, Mansaram said, 'Who's complained about me? How about letting me in on it?'

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[25] Aunt (father's sister).

'None of your business who. At the very least you ought to trust me not to make a false accusation.'

'If somebody can face me and say he's seen me loafing, then I'll admit I'm guilty.'

'What sense would it make for anybody to complain about you to your face and antagonise you? — so then you and three or four of your pals could go and smash all the tiles on his roof. Not one but several people have made the complaint I'm talking about and there's no reason at all why I shouldn't believe my friends. I want you to go and live permanently in the school.'

Mansaram's face fell. He said, 'I don't have any objection to going to live there. Whenever you say, I'll go.'

'Why are you hanging your head? Don't you want to go and stay there? It looks to me as though you are all upset because you're afraid of going to live there. What's the matter, what's bothering you? What kind of problem would you have there?'

Mansaram was not enthusiastic about going to live at the hostel; but when Munshiji insisted and asked the reason, to hide his embarrassment he looked pleased and said, 'Why should I be hanging my head? The hostel is just like home. I won't have any problems there either, and if I do I can manage. But of course, if there's no vacancy, I won't be able to move in.'

Totaram was a lawyer. He assumed that his brat was looking for some excuse so he wouldn't have to go there without incurring any reproach. He said, 'There's room for every student, why shouldn't there be for you?'

'A lot of the boys haven't been able to get a seat,' said Mansaram 'and they're living in rooms rented in private houses. Just now when one student's name was scratched from the hostel fifty requests came in for the seat.'

The lawyer did not deem it right to engage in further debate. Instructing Mansaram to be ready tomorrow morning he had his buggy brought and went out for a ride. For sometime now he had been making a habit of riding out every evening. Some person of

great experience had informed him that there was no better method than this to insure a long life. When he had gone, Mansaram went to Rukmini and said, *'Buaji,* Father has asked me to live at the school starting tomorrow.'

Astonished, Rukmini asked, 'But why?'

'How do I know? He told me that I was hanging around loafing like some tramp.'

'Didn't you tell him you didn't do any such thing?'

'Of course I told him, but when does he ever pay any attention?'

'This must be some kindness from your new *Ammaji* — what else could it be?'

'No, *Buaji,* I don't suspect her. The poor girl never lets a mean word out, even unintentionally. If I go to ask her for anything at all, she gets up right away and gives it to me. '

'What do you know about women's character? This is surely some fire she's started. Just watch, I'm going to ask her.'

In high dudgeon Rukmini went to Nirmala. She was not going to miss such a splendid opportunity to humiliate her, wound her and make her weep. For though Nirmala treated her with respect, gave way to her and never answered back, though she wanted Rukmini to instruct her, correct her where she was at fault and supervise her work, Rukmini continued to be hostile to her.

Nirmala got up from her charpoy and said, 'Come, *Didi,* sit down.'

Still standing, Rukmini said: 'I ask you, do you want to drive everybody out of the house and stay here all by yourself?'

'What's happened, *Didiji?'* Nirmala asked in alarm. 'I haven't said anything wrong to anyone, have I?'

'You're having Mansaram thrown out of the house, and on top of that you tell me you haven't said anything! Don't you at least realise what you've done?'

'Didiji, I touch your feet and swear, I don't know anything about it. May I be struck blind if I've so much as opened my mouth about this matter.'

'Don't swear oaths in vain,' said Rukmini. 'Until now Totaram never would scold the boy. Once, when Mansaram went to his grandmother's house for a week, Totaram was so upset that he himself went there to bring him back. Now he's ordering this same Mansaram to leave home and go and live at the school. If one hair of that boy's head is harmed, you'll know it! He's never lived away from home before. He can't take care of his meals or dressing up, he falls asleep anywhere he happens to be. Theoretically he's become a young man, but his nature has remained like a child's. That school will be deadly for him. No one there is going to care about whether he's eaten or where he's left his clothes or where he's slept. If even at home no one is looking after him who's going to care about him when he's away? I've warned you, just remember you'll be responsible for your deed.'

With that Rukmini left the room.

When Munshiji came back from his drive Nirmala immediately brought up the subject. She told him that recently she had been studying English with Mansaram; when he went away wouldn't her study suffer? Who else would teach her? Until this moment the lawyer had known nothing about this. Nirmala thought that when she had acquired some proficiency, one day she would astound *Vakil*[26] *Sahib* by speaking to him in English. She had already acquired a little knowledge from her brothers; now she was studying it in a systematic way. The lawyer was inflamed with jealousy. He scowled and said, 'Since when has he been teaching you? You never mentioned it before.'

Nirmala had seen this expression on his face only once before, when he had beaten Siyaram until the child was almost lifeless. That look had reappeared today, only more terrifying. In a panic she said, 'My studying with him isn't going to do any harm. I study with him only when he has some free time. I tell him that if it's inconvenient then

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[26]Lawyer.

forget about it. Usually when he's just going out to play I hold him back for just ten minutes. I myself don't want his work to suffer either.'

It was all a trifle, but the lawyer was depressed and fell back on his charpoy. He rubbed his hand over his forehead and sank into deep thought. In so far as he understood it, matters had gone much further than this. He was angry with himself for not having arranged right in the beginning to board the brat out. He now understood the mystery behind the happy appearance of this grand lady of his these last few days. Formerly she never bothered to dress up, she didn't even fuss over her make-up, but now he could see she had practically been transformed. He felt like going on the spot and throwing Mansaram out of the house but his more adult rationality counselled him that at this moment there was no necessity for anger. If she suspected what he thought there would surely be a lot more trouble. But he ought to sound out her feelings. He said, 'I realise that his work won't suffer from teaching you a few minutes each day, but the boy is a loafer, he always finds some excuse for not doing his work. If he should fail tomorrow he'll say, "But I'm tutoring the whole day." So I'll get some Englishwoman to tutor you, it won't cost very much. You never even told me about this before. And what can he be teaching you, after all? He'll tell you a few words and then dash off. You'll never learn anything this way.'

Nirmala immediately disposed of this charge. 'No, it isn't like that at all, he puts all his heart into teaching me and the way he teaches is such that studying is a pleasure. Come someday and see how he explains things. I don't imagine any tutor would teach with such devotion.'

Gloating over his skilful questioning, Munshiji said, 'Does he tutor you just once or several times each day?'

Nirmala had still not grasped the motive behind these questions. She said, 'At first he just taught me in the late afternoon, but now for some time he also comes once more and looks over what I've written. He tells me that he's the best in his class. He's just now won first place in the exams, so how can you imagine that he doesn't love his school work? I'm telling you all this so *Didi* won't think that

I'm causing trouble and taunt me about it. Only a little while ago she threatened me.'

Munshiji said to himself, 'Now I understand it perfectly! You who were just a kid yesterday want to pull the wool over my eyes? You think that by using *Didi* you can make things work out for you?' Aloud he said, 'I don't understand why the boy is so upset at the very mention of rooming at the school. Other boys are happy to be living with their friends, but he, on the contrary, is crying over it. Until recently he was still studying diligently. The result of this industriousness is that he's best in his class, but for some time now he's become completely addicted to loafing around. If we don't put a stop to it right away it's going to become uncontrollable. I'm going to get an Englishwoman to tutor you.'

The next day Munshiji dressed very early and went out. Several clients were sitting in the living room, among them a Raja from whom Munshiji received an annual retainer of several thousand. But Munshiji left him there, promising to come back in ten minutes, got into his buggy and went to the house of the Headmaster of the school. The Headmaster was a very courteous gentleman and greeted Munshiji most hospitably, but told him there was no vacancy for even one boy at the hostel. Every single room was occupied. The School Inspector's strict rule was that rooms be offered to the city boys only after the boys from the countryside had been accommodated. Therefore, even if there had been a vacancy it could not have been given to Mansaram, for there were so many applications already on file from the day students. Munshiji was a lawyer, day and night he dealt with creatures like this who, driven by greed, could make the impossible possible, the impracticable practicable. He assumed that perhaps if he gave a small bribe he would have his way, so he ought to have a tactful little chat with the office clerk — but the clerk just laughed and said, 'Munshiji, this is not a court, it's a school. If the Headmaster had the slightest hint of this he'd be furious and Mansaram would be kicked out there and then. There might even be a formal complaint to the officials.' Utterly discomfited and very irritated, Munshiji returned home just as ten was striking. At this moment Mansaram was coming out of the

house on his way to school. Munshiji stared at him severely, as though he were his enemy and went into the house.

After this, for a week or two, it became Munshiji's habit to go, either in the morning or evening, to see some school's headmaster or other and try to get Mansaram accepted in a hostel, but there was no room at any of them and from each one he was turned away. Now there were two possible plans: either to rent a room for Mansaram in a private house or to enrol him in another school somewhere else. Both of these presented no difficulty. Out in the district schools the vacancies were frequent. But now Munshiji's suspicious heart had become more tranquil. From that day on he had never again seen Mansaram going into the women's part of the house. And it had reached the point where he no longer went out to play. Both before going off to school and after coming home he would stay in his own room. It was the hot weather and out in the wide open *maidan*[27] one sweated rivers, but still Mansaram did not come out of his room. His self-esteem had been deeply wounded by the accusation of being a worthless idler and he wished, by this behaviour, to wipe away the stain.

One day Munshiji was sitting at his dinner when Mansaram, who had just bathed, came to eat. For several months now Munshiji had not seen his son's naked body. Seeing it today he was astonished. Before him stood a veritable skeleton. On his face there was also the lustre of the *brahmachari*[28], but his body had wasted away to skin and bones. He asked, 'Haven't you been feeling well lately? How thin you've gone!.

Mansaram wound his *dhoti*[29] around him and said, "I've been feeling fine.'

'But then why have you become so thin?'

'I'm not thin. When was I ever fatter than this?'

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[27] Field/plains.

[28] Ascetic.

[29] A kind of clothing, often worn by males in India to cover the lower part of the body. It consists of a long cloth knotted round the waist, passed between the legs and tucked in at the back.

'Oh, splendid! Half of your flesh has disappeared and you say you're not thin. Tell me, *Didi,* did he use to be like this?'

Rukmini was in the courtyard making an offering of water to the sacred *tulsi*[30] plant. She said, 'Why should he be thin? He's being very well looked after now. I'm just a poor simple soul, I don't know anything about feeding children. By feeding him with the best vegetables I used to spoil them completely. But now there's an educated woman who's an expert in keeping house so efficiently! May God keep him in good health!'

'You're being unjust, *Didi,*' said Munshiji. 'Who told you you spoiled the boys? You ought to do whatever work someone else can't manage, not cut yourself off from the family. When she's still only a girl herself how can she look after others? This is your job.'

'While I thought it was mine I did it,' said Rukmini. 'When you decided it was someone else's, did you expect me to cling around your neck? Ask him how long it's been since he's drunk milk. Go into his room and look, the sweets that were sent him for a snack are lying there rotting. The mistress of the house thinks that when she's laid out the food, if nobody eats, should she shove it into their mouths? So brother, that's how those boys, who've never known the happiness of a mother's affection, are being fed. Your sons are being dealt with very strictly, while they're living like orphans now, how can they be happy? And I hear you're making arrangements for Mansaram to live at school. Now the poor lad is forbidden even to come inside the house, he's even afraid to come near me, and anyway what do I have put by that I can go and feed him?'

In the meantime, Mansaram ate two pieces of bread and stood up. Munshiji asked him, 'What, finished already? You've been sitting here no more than a minute. What have you eaten? — just a couple of pieces of bread.'

Abashed, Mansaram said, 'There were lentils and vegetables too. If I eat any more my throat starts to burn and I get sour burps.'

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[30]Basil.

When Munshiji finished eating and left the table he was very concerned. If the boy kept getting thinner he would catch some dreadful disease. At this moment he was extremely angry with Rukmini. She was jealous because she felt she was no longer mistress of the house. She didn't stop to wonder whether she had any right to be. How could she be the mistress of a household when she couldn't even keep a record of expenses? Anyway, she *had* run the house for a whole year and hadn't been able to save a single pice. With a little skill two hundred or two hundred and fifty might have been saved from his salary. But during her reign that salary didn't even suffice to meet expenses. No matter, but all that affection had spoiled the boys. Why did such big boys have to eat everytime somebody tried to feed them? They ought to look after themselves.

Munshiji spent the whole day lost in such deliberations. He spoke about it to a few friends. They said, 'Don't put any obstacles in the way of his playing. From now on don't keep him prisoner. There's much less possibility of his going wrong playing in the open air than shut up in a room. Of course, keep him away from bad company but not to the point where you don't let him go out of the house. In adolescence isolation is very damaging to the character.'

Munshiji now realised his mistake. He came home and went to Mansaram, who had just returned from school and without changing his clothes was sitting with an open book staring out of the window. His glance fell on a beggar woman who was holding her child in her lap and begging. Seated in his mother's lap the child was as happy as if he were seated on some throne. When he saw the child Mansaram burst into tears. For was not this child happier than himself? In the whole wide world what was there that he could find to take the place of that lap to make him happy? Even God could not create any such thing. Why did God bring into being the children whose destiny was to suffer the pain of separation from their mothers? Was there anybody in the world right now as unlucky as himself? Who cared about his eating and drinking or whether he lived or died? If I die today, he thought, who is there to feel any grief? My father gets his pleasure from making me cry, he doesn't even want to see my face. He's getting ready to throw me out of the house. Oh! Mother! Today

they all call your darling son an idler. That same father, whose hands you joined with mine and my two brothers now calls me a loafer and a scoundrel. I'm not even worthy to go on living in this house. With these thoughts, Mansaram began to weep with bitter anguish.

At this very moment Totaram came into the room and stood. Mansaram immediately wiped his tears and stood with bowed head. This was very likely the first time that Munshiji had set foot in his son's room. Mansaram's heart began to pound as he wondered what calamity was about to befall him now. When he saw him crying, for an instant Munshiji's fatherly affection started up out of its deep sleep. Distressed, he said, 'Why, why are you crying, son? Has someone spoken harshly to you?'

Stopping the welling tears with great difficulty, Mansaram said, 'No, sir, I'm not crying.'

'And your *Amma* hasn't said anything nasty to you?'

'No sir, she doesn't even talk to me.'

'What can I do, son? I married so that you children would have a mother, but my hope hasn't been fulfilled. Doesn't she speak to you at all?'

'No sir, for months now she hasn't said anything.'

'A woman's character is peculiar,' said Munshiji. 'One never knows what she wants. If I'd known she had a temperament like that I never would have married her. Every day she fusses over one thing or another. Why, she herself told me that she had no idea where you disappeared to all day. How could I know what trouble she was plotting? I thought you must have fallen into bad company by idling and roaming all day. What kind of a father would it be who wouldn't be upset at seeing his beloved son idling and wasting his time? That was why I decided to put you into a hostel. That's all, it wasn't anything else, son! I don't want to stop you from playing and having fun. It breaks my heart to see you in this kind of shape. Yesterday I learned that I was mistaken. Play to your heart's content, go out as often as you like morning and afternoon to the playing field. The fresh air will be good for you. If you need anything, just

tell me. There's no need to tell her. Just act as though she's not even in the house. If your mother's gone from this world, I'm still here.'

The boy's simple, guileless heart was thrilled by this paternal affection. It seemed to him that God Himself was standing before him. Agitated and desperate, he had thought his father cruel and God knows what all else. He had held nothing against his stepmother. Now he had learned how unjust he had been toward this God-like father. A kind of wave of devotion sprang up in his heart and he touched his head to his father's feet and began to cry. Munshiji was overwhelmed with compassion. This son for whom he used to become concerned if he was out of his sight for a mere instant; whose decency, cleverness and character everybody in the family and out of it always praised — why had he been so cruel toward that son? He had begun to consider his own dear one an enemy and was getting ready to banish him. Nirmala had become a wall standing between son and father. In order to draw Nirmala closer to himself he had to retreat, while the distance between father and son grew ever greater. As a result today it had reached the stage where he was obliged to resort to deception like this with his own dear son. Today, after much reflection, he had hit upon a solution by which he hoped that drawing Nirmala from between them he would bring his beloved son back to himself. He began to set his plan in motion, but who could tell if it would have the desired effect or not?

Since the day Totaram, despite all Nirmala's pleading and entreaties, had decided to send Mansaram off to a hostel, she had given up studying with her stepson and no longer even spoke to him, for she had got just a glimmer of her husband's readiness to be suspicious. Awful! Such a doubting nature! Probably only God might be above suspicion in this house. Her husband's mind was full of such evil sentiments. How could he think her such a good-for-nothing? Mulling this over, she wept for several days. Then she began to wonder why he had such doubts about her. What was there about her which made him mistrust her? After much reflection she could find nothing in herself to make him. Then could her studying with Mansaram, her laughing and chatting with him be the cause of this suspicion? Well then, she would give up studying, she would not speak to Mansaram even accidentally, she would not even look at him.

But this problem seemed insoluble for her. By talking and joking with Mansaram her pleasure-loving imagination was stirred and satisfied. Conversing with him she experienced an incomparable pleasure which she could not express in words. There was not even a trace of sinful desire in her heart. She could not imagine even in a dream an act of immoral love with Mansaram. The natural longing every creature possesses for talking and laughing with others of his own age — this was an unconscious medium of satisfying it. Now her unsatisfied yearning began to burn like a lamp in Nirmala's heart. Gradually her soul was becoming troubled by some unknown anguish. She moped about here and there, searching for some unknown lost object; where she sat she would go on sitting; she did not feel like doing any of her tasks. But when Munshiji came home she would suppress all her longing in desperation and, smiling, begin to chat with him about trifles.

Yesterday when Munshiji had eaten and gone off to court Rukmini gave Nirmala a good tongue-lashing. 'If you knew that you'd have to bring up children here why didn't you tell your family not to marry you to Totaram? You might have gone where there was nobody but your husband. Such a man, seeing your charms and good looks, would have blessed his fortune. But here don't expect an old man to be charmed by your looks and wiles. He married you to look after these children, not for fun and enjoyment.'

Rukmini continued to sprinkle salt on the injury for a long time, but Nirmala did not make the slightest protest. She did want to prove her innocence, but she could not. If she should say that she was doing what her husband wanted her to, then the family secret would be exposed. If she acknowledged her error, then she feared some unpredictable consequence. She was very articulate, she neither feared nor hesitated to tell the truth, but in this delicate situation she was obliged to maintain silence. There was nothing else that she could do. She saw that Mansaram continued to be very lonely and depressed; she also saw that he was becoming more and more emaciated every day. But a seal had been put on both her speech and her actions. Nirmala was in the very same situation as a thief whose house has been robbed.

When something happens against our expectations we experience sorrow. Mansaram had never expected that Nirmala would complain about him, and in consequence he was profoundly saddened. Why had she done it? What did she want? Was it because he was living off her husband's earnings or that it was costing them money to pay for his education and clothing? She must want him not to stay on at home — if he left they would save money. And still she continued to appear pleased with him and he had never heard a single harsh word from her. Was all that just her deceitfulness? Possibly, for after all, did not the hunter scatter grain before the bird in his net? Unfortunately, he had not realised that there was a snare beneath the grain, that her motherly affection was only a prelude to his banishment.

Still, what was wrong with his staying on? Wasn't her husband also his father? Was the bond of father and son any less strong than that of husband and wife? Well, he didn't envy her domination — let her do what she liked, he couldn't protest. But why did she want to deprive him of his father's love? In her whole kingdom could she not even tolerate seeing him sheltering in the shade of a tree?

But she must have thought that when he grew up he would take possession of her husband's wealth, so it would be good to get rid of him right now. Mansaram wondered how he might convince her that she need not have any such suspicion of him. How could he say

to her that he would take poison and give up his life rather than cause her any harm? No matter how many hardships he might be obliged to suffer he would never be a source of hurt to her. Even though his father had caused him to come into the world and even now had not diminished in affection for him, still he hadn't realised that from the day his father married Nirmala he would drive his children from his heart. Now they could live as though they were orphans, they had no rights in the family. May be as a result of earlier incarnations their state was somewhat better than that of other orphans, but still — they were orphans. The day their mother departed from this world they had become orphans. Whatever was still lacking from that state was completed by this marriage. At first he had not had much to do with her. If in those days she had complained about him to his father perhaps he would not have felt so much sorrow. He'd have been ready for the blow. And couldn't he too work hard and earn his living? But she had struck him at the worst time. The wild beast strikes at man only when he catches him napping, therefore she had been so kind and accommodating towards him. If he was the least bit late in getting up to eat she would call him time and time again, for his breakfast fresh pudding would be made, and she would keep asking him, 'Sure you don't need some spending money?' And she had even had a hundred rupee watch ordered for him.

But couldn't she at least have thought up some other complaint instead of calling him a loafer? When after all had she ever seen him idling? She could have said that he wasn't enthusiastic about his studies, that he was always asking for money for one thing or another. Why had she settled on this one thing? Maybe because it was the keenest blow she could strike at him. With the first shot she'd struck him with an arrow of fire, from which there was no refuge anywhere. So that he would be disgraced in his father's eyes, naturally. It was just an excuse to put him in a hostel. Her aim was to get rid of an unwanted person, just the way you scoop a fly out of the milk. After a few months they might cut off the payments, and then it wouldn't matter whether he lived or died. If he'd known that this whole idea came from her, even had there been no place

anywhere he would have found one. He would have found space in the servants' quarters, and there was a lot of room for camping out on the veranda. Well, when no affection remained, then it was shameful to hang around just to keep your stomach filled, for it was no longer his home, nor was his father any longer his father. He was his son, but Munshiji was not his father. Every relationship in the world was based on love; where there wasn't any love, there was nothing. And he called out to his mother, 'Where are you *Ammaji?*'

With these thoughts in his head Mansaram began to cry. His tears flowed more copiously as memories of his mother's love were awakened. Several times he cried out, *'Amma! Amma!'* just as though she were standing there to hear him. Today for the first time he experienced the grief of being motherless. He was a self-confident and courageous boy, but having been fostered in a state of complete happiness before this time, he now felt himself cast adrift.

It had just struck ten at night. The kitchen-maid had already called twice for Mansaram to come for his supper. The last time, Mansaram, irritated, said, 'I'm not hungry, I'm not going to eat anything, so don't keep pestering me.' So when Nirmala wanted to send her once more on the same mission she would not go. She said, *'Bahuji*[31], he won't come just because I'm calling him.'

'Why won't he?' Nirmala asked. 'Go and say that the food is getting cold. He must take at least a few bites.'

'I've already said all that and it hasn't done any good,' said the maid.

'Did you tell him that I'm sitting here waiting?'

'No *Bahuji,* as a matter of fact I didn't — why should I lie?'

'All right then, go and tell him that I'm just sitting here waiting for him to come and that if he doesn't I'll just clear away the supper and go to bed.[32] Listen, my Bhungi, go once more—' she laughed, '—and if he won't come, then pick him up and bring him.'

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[31] Daughter-in-law.

[32] i.e., without having her own dinner.

Bhungi frowned but she went; after a moment she came back and said, '*Arrey, Bahuji,* he's crying. Someone must have hurt his feelings, don't you think?'

Nirmala started up and took several steps forward just in the way of a mother who's just heard that her son has fallen into a well. Then she hesitated and said to Bhungi, ' Crying? Didn't you ask him why?'

'No, *Bahuji,* I didn't — why should I lie?'

He was crying. He was all alone in this silent night, crying. He must have been remembering his mother. How could she go and console him? Alas, how? For her part, she was always being blamed for no real fault of her own. God! she thought, you're my witness, if ever I've said anything against him, even inadvertently, then let him confront me with it. What could she do? He must have thought she had complained about him to his father. How could she convince him that not one word against him had ever come from her lips? If she could think anything evil about a boy like that, whose character was like a young god's, then there could be no worse monster than herself in the world.

Nirmala saw that Mansaram's health was deteriorating day by day; day by day he was getting thinner, the lustre of his complexion was fading, his vigorous body was wasting away. The cause for this was no secret to her but she could say nothing about it to her husband. It lacerated her heart to see all this but she could not bring herself to speak of it. At times she was vexed that Mansaram should be so depressed about so trifling a matter. Could he actually have become an idler just because he'd been called one? Her own case was different — the least bit of suspicion could bring about her downfall; but why should he be so concerned about such things?

She felt a strong desire to go to him and after she had calmed him down bring him his food and feed him. For otherwise the poor boy would go hungry the whole night long. Unfortunately, she herself was at the bottom of this trouble. Before she came, there had been peace in the house. The father would have given his life for his children, the children adored their father. But as soon as she came,

obstacles arose. How would it end? Only God could tell and God would not even let her die. The poor child all alone and going hungry. That other time too he had made a face, got up and left his food — and what did he eat? — no more than the diet of one or two-year olds.

Nirmala went to him, against her husband's wish. And her heart was trembling as she went to appease one who was by relationship her son.

Before she started she looked toward Rukmini's room. Rukmini had already eaten and was now sound asleep. Then she went out towards her husband's room. There too all was quiet. Munshiji had not yet come home. After these precautions she went to Mansaram. The door was open, Mansaram was seated with a book on the table before him, his head bowed, like a veritable image of grief and anxiety. Nirmala wanted to call to him but her voice stuck in her throat.

Suddenly Mansaram lifted his head and looked toward the door. He saw Nirmala but could not recognise her in the darkness. Startled, he said, 'Who is it?' Her voice shaky, Nirmala said, 'It's me. Why didn't you come and eat? It's gone awfully late.'

Mansaram turned his face away and said, 'I'm not hungry.' 'I've heard that already three times from Bhungi.'

With an ironic laugh, Mansaram said, 'If I got hungry, then where would you hear it from?' When he said this he wanted to shut the door but Nirmala drew it back and came into the room. She caught hold of Mansaram's hand and, with tears in her eyes, she said humbly and gently, 'Please do come and eat a little, if only because I'm asking you. If you won't eat, then I won't either, I'll just go to bed. Only two bites, please. You don't want me to go hungry all night, do you?'

Mansaram deliberated. She had not yet eaten, she had kept on waiting for him. Was she a goddess of affection, parental love and humility or a deluding image of envy and evil? The memory of his mother returned to him: when he used to be sulky she too would

come in just this way to persuade him and until he came she would not leave. He could not reject so humble a request. He said, 'I'm sorry I've been such a trouble for you. If I'd realised you were going hungry while you sat waiting for me I would have come and eaten long ago.'

Nirmala said reproachfully, 'How could you think that I'd go to bed while you went hungry? Because I'm your step-mother, could I become so selfish?'

Suddenly from her husband's room Munshiji's coughing could be heard. She looked — it seemed that he was coming toward Mansaram's room. The colour drained from her face. She swiftly left the room and finding no opportunity to get clear away she said with a harsh voice, 'I'm not a servant that I should have to wait so late for someone at the kitchen door. When somebody doesn't want to eat he should give advance notice.'

Munshiji saw Nirmala standing there. How extraordinary! What could she have been up to? He said, 'What are you doing here?'

Harshly Nirmala answered, 'What am I doing? I'm weeping over my fate! That's all there is to it, I'm the root of every problem. One person sulks, another pouts — who all do I have to make up to and how far do I have to go to do it?'

Astonished Munshiji said, ' What's the matter?'

'He won't come to have his dinner, what else? I sent the maid ten times, and finally I came running. It's no trouble for him to say he's not hungry while I slave for the whole house with everybody ready to insult and humiliate me. Somebody may not be hungry, but who'll stop people from saying this witch won't give anybody anything to eat?'

'Why haven't you eaten?' Munshiji asked Mansaram. 'Do you realise what time it is?'

Mansaram stood as though dumbfounded. He was confronted with a great mystery which he was incapable of understanding. How could the flame of envy come so suddenly into eyes which only a

moment before had overflowed with tears of humility? Why had a stream of poison issued from lips which only a moment before had poured out nectar? In a state of near stupefaction he said, 'I'm not hungry.'

'Why not?' Munshiji demanded in a scolding tone. 'If you weren't hungry why didn't you say so earlier this evening? Should we have to wait all the night for you to get hungry? You didn't used to be like this. Since when have you learned to sulk? Go and eat.'

'No sir, I'm just not at all hungry.'

Totaram ground his teeth and said, 'Very well, you can eat when you get hungry.' With this, he went back to his room. But Munshiji was going to bed so Nirmala went to take away the food. She rinsed her mouth, took some *pan,* then returned smiling to Munshiji. He asked her, ' You did eat, didn't you?'

'What could I do? Should I give up my food for anybody?'

'I don't know what's happened to him,' Munshiji said. 'I simply can't understand it. Everyday he just wastes away and stays shut up in that room.'

Nirmala said nothing. She found herself sinking in a boundless sea of anxiety. When he saw her change of mood what could Mansaram have thought? Would it occur to him to wonder why she had frowned as soon as she caught sight of his father? And could he grasp the reason for it? The poor boy was finally going to come and have his dinner and just then that fine gentleman burst upon them from out of the blue. How could she explain the mystery to him? Was any explanation even possible? What a mess she'd put herself into!

In the morning she got up and busied herself with the usual household tasks. Suddenly, at nine o'clock, Bhungi came and said, 'Mansa *Babu* is loading all his books and papers on an *ekka*[33].'

Nirmala was stunned. 'Loading on an *ekka?* ...But where's he going?'

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[33]One horse carriage.

'When I asked him he said he was going to live at the school, nowhere else.'

Mansaram had got up at first light and gone off to see the headmaster of his school, made arrangements for staying there and come home. At first the headmaster had said there was no room and told him how many boys' applications he'd received already before him. But when Mansaram said that if he didn't get a place then perhaps he might not be able to continue his studies and wouldn't be able to take his exams, the headmaster relented. He was counting on the boy to pass his exams with distinction. The teachers were confident that he would brighten the reputation of the school. How could the headmaster let a boy like this go? He'd had a room in his offices cleared out, so Mansaram, as soon as he'd returned home, began to load his effects on an *ekka.*

Munshiji said, 'But why such haste? Go after a few more days. I want to make arrangements for a good cook for you.'

'The school cook makes very good meals,' said Mansaram.

'You must pay attention to your health. One ought not to sacrifice one's health for studies.'

'No one there is allowed to study after nine o'clock and sports are scheduled regularly for everybody.'

'Why are you leaving your bedding behind? What are you going to sleep on?'

'I'm taking a blanket. I don't need anything else.'

'While the servant's loading your luggage, go and eat some thing. You didn't eat anything at all last night.'

'I'll eat there. Before I came home I told the cook there to make something for me. If I start eating here I'll be late.'

In the house Jiyaram and Siyaram too were insisting on going with their brother. Nirmala tried to console them. 'Children, little boys don't live in the hostel, there you have to look after yourselves without any help.'

All of a sudden Rukmini appeared and said, 'You have a heart of stone, madam! The boy didn't eat anything last night and now he's going away without eating anything either, and you're scolding these children. You know what he's like: you must realise he's not going to school, he's going into exile. Once he goes he won't come back again. He's not one of those boys who goes out and plays and forgets he's been punished. All this business has eaten into his heart.'

Timidly, Nirmala said, 'What can I do, *Didiji?* He won't listen to what anybody says. If you would just go and call him back he'd come.'

'But what is it, after all, that's driving him away? He was never the least bit unhappy at home. Nowhere did he feel so much at ease as here. You must have scolded him or complained about him. Why are you causing so much trouble? You won't rest will you until you've brought the house down around you.'

In tears, Nirmala said, 'If I scolded him may my tongue be cut out! It's only because I'm his stepmother that you all think ill of me. I beg you, go and call him back.'

Rukmini answered sharply, 'Why don't *you* go and call him back? Would that be too humiliating for you? If he were your son would you just be sitting around like this?'

Nirmala's condition was like that of the bird with broken wings who sees the snake approach and wants to fly but cannot. He hops and falls, flapping his wings to no avail. Nirmala's heart was pounding inside her but she could not bring herself to go outside.

In the meantime the two boys came in and said, '*Bhaiyaji* has left. ' Nirmala stood statue-still, as though in a trance. He had gone and had not even come into the house, not even to see her. Gone? How much he must hate her! She was nothing at all to him. But his aunt was here — shouldn't he have come in to see her? But I was here, Nirmala thought, so how could he set foot inside? I would have been watching, that's it — and so he had just left.

9

With Mansaram gone the house seemed empty. The two younger boys were studying in the same school. Everyday Nirmala asked them how Mansaram was doing. She hoped that he would come home when there was a school holiday, but when the school holiday had passed and he did not come, Nirmala began to be distressed. She had made and kept *moong ke laddoo*[34] for him. Early Monday morning she gave the delicacies to Bhungi and sent her to the school. At nine Bhungi returned; Mansaram had sent back the sweets untouched.

'Does he look any healthier than when he left?' Nirmala asked her.

'Healthier he isn't — he's even skinnier!'

'Isn't he feeling well?'

'I didn't ask him, *Bahuji,* why should I lie? But the servant there is just like my younger brother-in-law. He tells me the young master lives on practically nothing. He eats a couple of pieces of bread and then leaves the table. Then he doesn't eat anymore all day, he just keeps on studying and studying.'

'You asked him, didn't you, why he sent back these snacks?' 'I didn't ask him *Bahuji,* why should I lie? He said, "Take these away, there's no point in leaving them here," so I took them and came home.'

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[34] Savouries made from green gram.

'Didn't he say anything else? Didn't you ask him why he didn't come yesterday on the holiday?'

'Why should I lie, *Bahuji?* I didn't think to ask him that. Oh, but he said I was not to come to the school anymore; nor was I to bring anything for him; and to tell my *Bahuji* not to send any letters or notes to him, nor to send him any messages with the boys. And then he said something too awful to repeat. Then he started to cry.'

'What was it he said?' Nirmala demanded.

'How can I tell you, *Bahuji?* He said, "My life is cursed," and when he'd said that he started to cry.'

Nirmala breathed a deep sigh. She felt as though her heart would break. Her whole body was racked with a surge of grief. She could not go on sitting there. She lay down on the bed, hiding her face, and began to weep bitterly. 'He's found out about it!' these words kept throbbing her consciousness. 'He's found out about it.' Lord, what would happen now? The flame of suspicion which was turning her to ash now flared up with a hundred times greater intensity. She had no concern for herself — what hope of happiness in life was left to tempt her now? She consoled her heart with the thought that this must be penance for deeds done in an earlier life. What creature could be so shameless as to be able to go on living for long in such a state? On the altar of duty she had made a sacrificial offering of her life and all her desires. Her heart wept but she had to keep the appearance of a smile on her face. She had to laugh and chat with a person whose face she did not want to look at. Who could know how much she suffered from and loathed the embrace of one — the touch of whose body felt to her like the cold touch of a snake. At that moment her only wish was that the earth might open to swallow her up. But until this moment all the nastiness had been directed at herself alone and she had given up worrying about herself. But now the problem had become altogether frightful. She could not bear to witness Mansaram's anguish. Her very soul was shaken merely to imagine the effect which any such accusation could have on a sensitive, spirited boy like Mansaram. Now no matter what suspicion might be directed at her, even if she were

obliged to take her own life, she could not remain silent. She was burning to protect Mansaram! She decided to tear off her veil of shyness and modesty and throw it away.

After eating and before he went off to the law courts Munshiji always made a point of meeting once with Nirmala. It was his time to go to her. Thinking that he must surely be coming, Nirmala stood at the door and began to wait for him but to her surprise she saw that he was on his way out of the house. His horse was harnessed and the carriage at the door. Usually he ordered it while he was with her. So would he not be coming to her this morning but simply go out and leave? But this was not possible. She said to Bhungi, ' Go and call the master. Tell him it's something important, he must listen.'

Munshiji was all set to leave. When he got this message he came inside but without entering her room he asked from some distance, 'What's the matter, tell me quickly, my dear, I have some urgent business. I'm already a little late — I just got a note from the headmaster saying that Mansaram has a fever and would be better looked after at home. So I'm going to court by way of the school. Did you have something particular to tell me?'

Nirmala was thunderstruck. A fierce conflict started between the first tears and the words to answer: each was determined to come out first and neither was willing to give way an inch to the other. Considering the weakness of the voice and the power of tears, if the battle were to last one moment one would find it difficult to decide which would win the field. At last both burst out together, but as soon as they had emerged, the stronger suppressed the weaker. All that came from her mouth was: 'It was nothing special. So you're going there today, then.'

Munshiji said, 'When I questioned the boys they said that yesterday he just sat and studied. I don't know what can have developed today.' Trembling with emotion, Nirmala said, 'It's all your doing.' Munshiji scowled. 'My doing? What is it I'm doing?'

'Ask your heart! '

'I thought he didn't like studying here,' said Munshiji, 'While at school he'd be studying with other boys whether he wanted to or not, and this would be no bad thing. What else have I done?'

'Think carefully!' said Nirmala. 'Is that the only reason you sent him away? Was there nothing else in your mind?'

Shrinking back and trying to smile in order to hide his weakness, Munshiji said, 'And what can this matter possibly be? *You* think carefully!'

'Very well, I will indeed. Now *please* bring him home this very day. I'm afraid he'll only get sicker if he stays there. Here *Didiji* can look after him, nobody else can.'

After a moment she hung her head and said, 'If you don't want to bring him home because of me, then send me to my mother's place, I'll be perfectly comfortable there.'

Munshiji did not answer. He went outside and in a moment his carriage was on its way to the school.

Oh heart! How strange is your fate, how filled with mystery, how impenetrable! How quickly you change your mood — an art in which you are a master. It takes even the catherine wheel a little bit of time to change its colours, but for you to change your feelings it needs not even a millionth of a second! Where only a moment ago there had been affection, once again suspicion had usurped its place.

He went thinking, 'What if she has only invented an excuse?...'

10

For a couple of days Mansaram had been profoundly disturbed. Time and time again he recalled his mother; neither food nor study appealed to him. He underwent a kind of transformation. Days went by and even though he was living at the school he did not do the work which the teachers had assigned as homework. Consequently, he was obliged to take his place on the dunces' bench. What had never happened before was happening now and he had to suffer intolerable disgrace. On the third day, immersed in thoughts about all this, he was consoling himself. Am I the only one in the world, he thought whose mother has died? All stepmothers are of this very type. What's happening to me is nothing new. Now, as befits a man, I ought to do my work with doubled energy; whatever one's parents want one ought to satisfy them. If I get a scholarship this year there'll be no longer any need for me to take anything from home. Think how many boys receive the highest degrees solely by their own effort. A man's duty is just to surmount obstacles and do one's work when he finds the opportunity. What's the use of weeping and cursing your fate?

In the meantime Jiyaram had arrived and was standing in the room. Mansaram asked him, 'What's going on at home, Jiya? Our new *Ammaji* must be very pleased?'

Jiyaram said, 'I don't know what goes on in her mind, but since you came to school she hasn't eaten one meal. Whenever we see her she's crying. When Father comes home, though, she begins to laugh.

When you left, I too got my books together. I wanted to stay right here with you. That witch Bhungi went and told *Ammaji*. Father was sitting there, and right in front of him *Ammaji* came and took away my books and cried, and she said, "If you leave, then who'll be left in this house? If you people are running away from home because of me, then look, I'll just go away somewhere." I got very mad — Father wasn't there this time — I got mad and I said, "Why don't you go off somewhere? You have your own home, go and take it easy there. *We're* not your people, you'll only be content when we're no longer here".'

'Well said,' Mansaram said, 'very well said. She must have got even angrier at that and gone and complained to Father.'

'No, nothing like that happened. The poor woman sat down on the floor and started to cry. Even I felt sorry for her, I even began crying too, then she wiped my tears with the edge of her sari and said, "Jiya! I call God to witness, I never said one single word to your father about your brother. Disgrace is written in my fate and that's what I must endure." Then she said I don't know what all else which I couldn't understand. Something about Father.'

Troubled, Mansaram asked, 'What did she say about Father, do you remember?'

'I don't remember the exact words. Brother, my memory isn't too sharp. But the meaning seemed to be more or less that she had to put on an act in order to keep Father pleased. I can't tell all the things she said about righteousness and unrighteousness, which I couldn't understand at all. But I'm now convinced that it wasn't her wish to send you here.'

'You can't understand the meaning of all these tricks,' said Mansaram. 'They're awfully complicated.'

'You may interpret it that way, but not me.'

'When you can't understand geometry,' said Mansaram, 'then how can you understand this sort of thing? That night when she came asking me to go eat dinner and because of her insistence I was getting ready to go, the way she changed her stance the minute she saw Father, well, can I ever forget that?'

'I don't understand that,' said Jiyararn. 'Only yesterday when I came back from school she began to ask how you were. I said, 'He says he'll never set foot in this house again.' I wasn't lying, you told me that yourself. That was all she needed to hear to burst into sobs. I felt awful for having said it when it couldn't have any good result. She kept saying, "Would he give up his home just on my account? Is he so angry with me? He went away and didn't even come to say good-bye. His meal was ready, he didn't even come and eat it. Alas, how can I tell you the trouble I'm in?" Meanwhile, Father arrived. And that was that: she wiped her eyes right away and went up to him smiling. I can't understand it. Today she begged me to take her with me. Today I'm going to drag you back home. She's gone so thin in just two days that when you see her you'll feel sorry for her. You'll come, won't you?'

Mansaram did not answer. His legs were trembling. Jiyaram for his part ran off when he heard the attendance bell, but he lay down on the bench and sighed deeply as though he had not taken a breath for a very long time. From his mouth came forth words full of intolerable anguish. 'Oh God!' Apart from this name his life seemed to be without any foundation. No one could imagine how much despair, how much compassion, how much sympathy and humble entreaty filled this one sigh. Now the whole secret was laid bare to him and his wounded heart kept lamenting, 'Oh God! What a terrible disgrace!'

Could one imagine a greater calamity in life than this? Could anything in the world viler than this be imagined? Surely until this day no father had laid such a cruel stigma on his son. This terrible disgrace on one whose character everybody praised, one who was taken for a model by other boys, who never allowed impure thoughts to come near him! Mansaram felt as though his heart was breaking.

The second bell rang. The boys went to their rooms; but Mansaram, his cheek against the palm of his hand, went on staring at the ground as though he were utterly submerged in water, as though he could not show his face to anyone. He would be marked absent, he would be penalised — but he was not concerned about that. When he had been robbed of everything, now why fear these trifles? If he could go on living after being so disgraced then his life was surely accursed.

In that excess of grief he cried out, 'Mother! Where are you? Your son, for whom you sacrificed your life, whom you considered the foundation of your life, today is in deep trouble. His father is committing the gravest injustice against him. Alas, where are you?'

Then with calmer mind Mansaram began to wonder why this suspicion had arisen against him. What was the source? What could his father have observed in him to bring about such a suspicion? This was his father, not his enemy, who so spontaneously laid this crime on him. Surely he must have observed or heard something or other. Yet how much affection he used to have for him! He would not sit down to eat without his son and now he had become his enemy. This could not be without a cause.

Very well — when was the seed of this suspicion planted? The business about settling him in the hostel happened later. That evening when he'd come into his son's room and began to examine him was the day he had scowled so. What had happened that day which had seemed so displeasing? Mansaram had gone to ask his new *Ammaji* for something to eat. At that instant his father was sitting there. Yes, now he remembered, at that moment his face had turned red, and from that day forward his new *Amma* had given up studying with him. If he'd known that his father would take it ill that he came in and out of her room and that he talked with her and tutored her, would things today be the way they were? And new *Amma!* What must she be going through.

Uptil now Mansaram had not given much thought to Nirmala. As soon as he thought of her he was profoundly moved. Alas, how could her simple affectionate heart bear this blow? And oh, how deluded he had been! He had thought her affection a trick. How could he know that she had to act so harshly toward him to quieten Father's suspicion? How unjust he had been toward her! She must be in an even worse situation than himself. He at least had come here but where could she go? Jiya said she hadn't eaten her meals for two days. She just cried constantly. How could he go to her to console her? Why was she taking this affliction on herself for the sake of one as unlucky as himself? Why did she keep asking about his health?

Why did she make him cry? How could he say to her, 'Mother, I have no complaint at all against you, my heart is innocent and open toward you?'

She would still be sitting, in tears. What a great injustice it was! What had come over his father? Was this why he had married? Had he brought this girl home just to kill her? Had he broken off this tender blossom only to trample on it?

How could he rescue her? How could this innocent girl's face be bright again? She had been dealt this punishment only for acting affectionately toward him. And this was the reward she was getting for being so decent. How could he sit and watch while she was enduring such a cruel blow? Not just for his self-respect but for her very protection he would have to sacrifice his life. Except for this there was no other way to save her. Oh, how many desires there were in his heart! All of them would have to be dashed into the dust. Suspicion had been cast upon a true and devoted wife and all because of him. He would have to defend her, it was his duty. In this alone was true heroism. He said, 'Mother, with my own blood I'll wash away this stain, and in this will be both your salvation and mine.'

Mansaram spent the whole day mulling this over. In the evening his two brothers came to him and urged him to go with them.

'Why won't you come?' Siyaram asked. 'Come on, brother, come on!'

'Don't have the time to go just because you tell me to.' 'But after all, tomorrow's Sunday,' said Jiyaram.

'I have work on Sunday too.'

'All right, but you'll come tomorrow, won't you?'

'No, I have to go to a game tomorrow.'

'*Ammaji* is making *moong ke laddoo*,' said Siyaram. 'If you don't come you won't get one of them. Jiya, you and I'll eat them together and won't give him any.'

'Brother,' said Jiya, 'if you don't come tomorrow, may be *Ammaji* will come here.'

'Really? But no, why would she do that? If she comes here there'll be a lot of trouble. Tell her I've gone off to watch a game. '

'Why should I start telling lies?' said Jiyaram. 'I'll tell her you just sat here sulking. You'll see whether I bring her with me or not.'

Siyaram said, 'We'll tell her you didn't study today but just lay around sleeping.'

Mansaram got rid of these two emissaries by promising to come home tomorrow. When the two of them were gone he was once again plunged into worrisome thoughts. All night he tossed and turned. The holiday too passed with him just sitting. The whole day he was worried lest *Ammaji* really might come. If he heard the clatter of some cart, his heart began to pound. What if she actually came!

There was a small dispensary at the school. Every evening a doctor came for an hour and gave medicine to any boy who might be ill. When he came today Mansaram, who had something in mind, went to him. The doctor was well acquainted with Mansaram. Astonished when he saw him, he said, 'What on earth's happening to you? You look as though you're wasting away! You haven't got hooked on the bazaar, have you?[35] Really, what *has* happened to you? Just come over here, will you?'

Mansaram smiled. 'My disease is life,' he said. 'Do you have something for that too?'

'I want to examine you. Even your face has changed, one can hardly recognise you.' With this he seized Mansaram's hand and looked at his chest, back, eyes and tongue each in turn. Concerned, he said, "I'll go to see your father today. All the signs indicate that you're suffering from phthisis.'

Eagerly Mansaram asked, 'Fine, how long will it take to finish its work, doctor?'

'What sort of talk is this! When I meet with your father I'm going to advise him to send you to some place in the hills. God willing, you'll recover completely. The disease is now still in its first stages.'

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[35]i.e., gone to prostitutes.

'Then it looks as though it may yet take a year or two. But I can't wait that long. Please listen. I don't give a hang about phthisis and all that, and I don't have anything else to complain about. So don't get my father all upset over nothing. Right now I have a headache, so please give me something for it. Is there any kind of medicine that can make one sleep? — because I can't sleep for the last two nights.'

The doctor opened up the cabinet containing poisonous prescriptions and pouring a very small amount out of a bottle gave it to Mansaram. 'Then this is some kind of poison?' Mansaram asked. 'If somebody drank it would he die?'

'No, he wouldn't die, but he'd surely suffer severe dizziness.' 'Is there some medicine in the cabinet which would kill one as soon as one drank it?'

'Not one or two, but a great many medicines are like that. One drop into the stomach from that bottle and one's life can't be saved. The death is instantaneous.'

'Tell me, Doctor, people who take poison must suffer a great deal, I imagine?'

'Not all poisons cause suffering. There are several which turn a person cold as soon as he's taken them. The one in this bottle is like that: as soon as one drinks it one loses consciousness and never regains it again.'

Mansaram thought that after all it was quite easy to give up one's life. Then why did people fear it so? And how could he get hold of this bottle? If he found out the name of the medicine and went to get it from some druggist in town they'd never give it to him. Still, it shouldn't be any great trouble to get hold of it. He had learned that a life can be ended very easily and was as pleased as though he had just won a prize. Something in the nature of a great burden was lifted from his heart. The clouds of worry that had hovered above him had been torn asunder. Today for the first time in months he experienced a feeling of excitement.

Several boys, with the permission from the proctor were going off to see a play. Mansaram too went with them to the theatre. No

one in the world could have felt happier. Watching the pantomime on the stage he rolled with laughter and kept clapping, and was the first to cry out 'Once more.' He was intoxicated by the singing and yelled his approval. The attention of the spectators was constantly drawn toward him. Even the performers on the stage stared at him and wondered who this appreciative fan could be. His friends were astonished by his lack of restraint, for he was a boy with a most tranquil and serious nature. Why was he in a state of such hilarity now, why was there no limit to his enjoyment?

On returning from the theatre at two in the morning his hilarious spirits had still not diminished. He turned over one boy's charpoy, locked several others in their rooms and laughed when he heard them pounding from inside, until finally the principal, woken from his sleep by the racket, complained about Mansaram's rowdyism. Who could know what a frightful tumult was going on in his heart? The cruel wound of suspicion had done away with his modesty and self-respect. He had not the slightest fear of disgrace and scolding. This was not a case of having fun but the piteous outcry of his soul. When all the other boys had gone to sleep he also lay down on his charpoy, but he did not sleep. After a moment he got up and packed all his books in a box. If you were just going to die, what was the use of studying? For someone whose life was so overwhelmed with obstacles and torment, death was far better for him!

While he was still occupied with these thoughts the dawn came. He had not slept a wink for three nights. When he got up this time his legs were shaky and he felt a kind of giddiness. His eyes were burning and every limb felt weak. The sun was already high and he did not have sufficient strength to get up and wash his hands and face. Suddenly he saw Bhungi arriving accompanied by a servant carrying something in a cloth. His heart missed a beat. Oh God! he thought, she's come. What would happen now? Bhungi doubtless had not come alone. Surely the buggy was waiting outside. While before he had been incapable of getting up, now he made a dash as soon as he saw Bhungi and said in a troubled voice, *'Ammaji's* come with you, has she?' When he realised that she had

not, his mind became calm. Bhungi said, 'Little brother, she says she has never complained against you. This morning she wept and said, "Take these sweets to him and ask him why was I the cause of his leaving home!" Where shall I set this tray down?'

Harshly, Mansaram said, 'Off with the tray, you old witch! Bringing sweets from there! Get out of here with your sweets, and take care never to come back again. Just take your gift and go. Go and tell her I don't need her sweets. Go and say, "The house is your house, you stay in it, Mansaram is perfectly content at school. He's eating well and has lots of fun." And pay attention to this, say it in the presence of my father, do you understand? I'm not afraid of anybody — they can do whatever they want to do so they'll be satisfied. If they say so, I'll go to Allahabad, Calcutta. Banaras is just like any other town as far as I'm concerned. What are you putting down there?'

'Little brother,' said Bhungi, 'keep these sweets, otherwise she'll cry herself to death. Believe me, she'll cry herself to death.'

Suppressing the rising tears with a great effort, Mansaram said, 'What do I care if she dies or not? What great benefit has she been to me that I should have any regrets? She's ruined me. Tell her not to send any messages, there's no need.'

'Little brother, you say you eat well and have fun, but you've shrunk to half your size. Not even one half of what you were when you came here.'

'Your eyes are playing tricks. Just wait and see if I don't gain weight in just a day or two. Tell her to stop crying and snivelling. That when I heard she was crying and not eating, it didn't bother me. She's got me thrown out of the house, now she ought to enjoy herself there. She's pretending to show affection but I've learned a lot about such deceitful natures.'

Bhungi left. As soon as he'd finished speaking to her Mansaram began to feel a chill. It had been intolerable for him to have to suppress his feelings by carrying out this charade. His pride demanded that he bring this sorry business to an end as quickly as

possible; but what would come of it? Would Nirmala be able to bear up under this blow? Until now, while he had been imagining death, he had given no consideration to any other creature; but now all of a sudden he realised that the life-thread of another person was bound to his own life. Nirmala would assume that her cruelty alone had killed him. If she thought that would not her tender heart break? But her life even now was in a crisis. Trapped in the cruel net of suspicion could a weak woman, believing herself a murderess, continue to live for long?

Mansaram lay down on the charpoy and wrapped himself in the quilt but still he shivered. In a very short time he was running a high fever and fainted. In this unconscious state he began to dream all sorts of dreams. After a short while he woke up in alarm, his eyes opened, then he once again sank into unconsciousness.

Suddenly he was roused awake by his father's voice. Yes, it was indeed Munshiji's voice. He threw off the quilt and got up from the charpoy. In his heart there rose one wish — that he might die right in front of his father. It seemed to him that if he died his father would be truly content. Perhaps he had come just to see how long it would take his son to die. Munshiji caught Mansaram's hand so that he wouldn't fall and asked, 'How are you, my dear boy, why didn't you stay in bed? Go lie down, why are you standing up?'

'I'm perfectly all right, you're getting worried over nothing.'

Munshiji did not reply. On seeing his son's condition tears came to his eyes. This strapping boy, who'd made your heart glad to see him, was now withered to skin and bones. In just five or six days he'd become so thin that it was difficult to recognise him. Gently, Munshiji made him lie down on the charpoy and wrapped the quilt tight around him while he wondered what he ought to do now. He feared the boy might already be lost to him. This thought racked him with anguish. He sat down on a stool and began to sob. Mansaram, with his face muffled in the quilt, was weeping too. Only a few days ago his father's heart had been bursting with pride at the sight of him, but now, seeing him in this dreadful state, he was wondering whether to bring him home or not. Couldn't they have

any medicine here? He would stay by him twenty-four hours of the day. The doctor, after all, was right here, there would be no problem. If he brought him home only trouble was in the offing. His greatest fear was that at home Nirmala would stay constantly at Mansaram's side and he would not be able to forbid it — which he found intolerable.

Meanwhile, the warden came and said, 'I assume you will be taking him home with you. There's a carriage, it will be no problem. We really can't look after him very well here.'

Munshiji said, 'Yes, in fact I came with that idea in mind, but his condition appears very critical. I'm afraid that if we're the least bit careless he'll become delirious.'

'To be sure,' said the warden, 'there will be some slight inconvenience in taking him away from here, but you yourself can imagine that the sort of care he'll be getting at home can't in anyway be matched by us. Furthermore, it's against regulations to keep any sick boy here.'

'If you wish I'll get permission from the Headmaster. It seems to me highly improper to move him from here in the condition he's in.' When the warden heard the headmaster invoked he realised that this fellow was threatening him. A bit tremulously he said, 'The Headmaster can do nothing against regulations. How can I take on such a great responsibility?'

'What would happen now?' Munshiji wondered. Would he have to take Mansaram home? His excuse for leaving him here was that by removing him he feared his illness might take a turn for the worse. Was there any pretext for taking him from here to the hospital? Anyone who heard about it would say that he'd dumped him in the hospital to save the doctor's fees. But now he could see no other solution but to take him there. If the warden were disposed to accept a bribe now, he'd probably ask for the equivalent of a couple of years' salary. But since when were people who stuck by regulations so clever, so wise? If at this moment somebody could have dreamed up an objection to taking Mansaram home, Munshiji would have been grateful to him for his whole life. There was no time to think. This

warden had him in his clutches like a veritable fiend. Defeated, Munshiji called the two grooms and they lifted Mansaram up. The boy was semiconscious; startled, he said, 'What is it? Who is it?'

'Nobody, son,' said' Munshiji. 'I want to take you home. Come along, let me help you.'

'Why are you taking me home? I won't go!'

'You can't stay here, that's the regulation.'

'Whatever happens, I won't go home! Take me somewhere else, put me under a tree, put me in some hut, wherever you want, but don't take me home.'

The warden said to Munshiji, 'Don't pay attention to what he says, he's not in his right mind now.'

'Who isn't in his right mind?' Mansaram demanded. 'Do you think I'm not? Am I yelling insults at anybody? Am I grinding my teeth? What do you mean, I'm not in my right mind? Just leave me lying here, whatever happens will happen right here. If it comes to taking me to the hospital, I'll stay there. If I'm to live, I'll live, if I'm going to die, I'll die. But no way will I go home.'

Encountering such vehemence, Munshiji began once more to plead with the warden but he, stickler for regulations that he was, would not give way. If the illness turned out to be contagious and any other boy caught it, then would he not be responsible? Even Munshiji's legal wiles were checkmated by this kind of logic. At last Munshiji said to Mansaram, 'Son, why do you object to coming home? There you'll be able to get every kind of care.'

Munshiji spoke the words just to say something, but he feared lest Mansaram might consent to going home. He was looking for any excuse to put Mansaram in the hospital and he wanted to place the full responsibility for it on Mansaram alone. Their conversation was taking place in the presence of the Principal and he would bear witness that Mansaram was going to the hospital at his own insistence — Munshiji was in no way at all to blame.

Flaring up, Mansaram said, 'No, no, a hundred times no! I will *not* go home. Take me to the hospital and forbid everybody in the house to come to see me. Nothing has happened to me, I'm not sick at all. Please let go of me, I can walk by myself.'

He stood up and reeled drunkenly towards the door, but his legs were wobbling. If Munshiji had not helped him he would have hurt himself. But with the help of the servants Munshiji brought him up to the buggy and seated him inside.

The carriage started out for the hospital. It had happened just as Munshiji wanted. The boy was going to the hospital according to his own wish, and didn't this prove that he had no affection for anyone at home? Wasn't this an evidence that Mansaram was innocent? He had suspected him without any cause.

But in a very short while in place of satisfaction a sense of remorse rose in his heart. Instead of taking his son, who was dearer to him than life, to his home he was taking him to the hospital. In his whole vast house there was no room for his son, even now when his life was in danger. What irony!

After a moment a question suddenly rose in his mind: what if Mansaram had guessed his feelings? Wouldn't he for that very reason hate his home. If that were the case, it would be a most terrible thing.

Munshiji was horrified just to imagine that calamity. His heart began to pound as though he'd been punched in the chest. If *this* were the cause of the fever, then God help him. At this instant his state was truly pitiful. That fire, which he had lit to warm his own chilled hands, had now caught on to his house. His mind was overwhelmed with pity, grief, repentance and doubt. If his secret weeping could have been given voice, those who heard it would have responded by weeping themselves. If his tears could have flowed openly they would have formed a constant stream. Agitated with anguish he clutched Mansaram to his chest and sobbed bitterly.

The hospital gate came into view.

When Munshiji came home from court in the evening Nirmala asked him, 'Did you see him? How is he?' Munshiji saw that on her face there was not the least trace of concern or sadness, and she was made up and bedecked even more carefully than on other days. She did not, for instance, usually wear a necklace but today she wore one that lent a splendour to her neck. She was not very fond of jewellery on her hair either, but today over her black tresses and under the fine silk sari she wore a *jhumar*[36] that blazed like lights of a chandelier.

Munshiji was annoyed; he said, 'He's sick, what else is there to say?'

'But you went there to bring him home, didn't you?'

Angrily, he said, 'If he doesn't want to come, am I supposed to drag him by force? I kept urging him — "Son, come home, you'll have nothing to worry about there." But as soon as he heard the word *home* his fever got twice as bad. He was saying, "I'll die here, but I won't go home." Finally there was nothing else to do but to take him to the hospital — what else could I do?'

Then Rukmini too came out and stood on the veranda; she said, 'By nature he's very stubborn. He won't come here no matter what, and mark my words, he won't get better there either.'

'Go and see him for a few days,' said Munshiji meekly, 'then he'll be fine, sister. Your being there will console him. Please do what

[36]'An ornament consisting of a number of chains forming a fringe, which is attached to the top-knot of a woman's head and falls on the forehead.' (Platts)

I'm asking, sister. Alone he'll just cry until it kills him. All he does is repeat, 'Alas, *Amma.* Alas, *Amma!*' and keeps on crying. I'm going to see him, you come along with me. His condition isn't good. Sister, even his good looks have deserted him. Let's see if God will help us now.' As he said this tears began to flow from Munshiji's eyes, but Rukmini was unmoved. She said, 'I'm ready to go. If my darling's life can be saved by my being there, then I'll run there as fast as ever I can, but you mark my words, brother: he's not going to get any better there. I know him well. There's nothing wrong with him except the grief at being thrown out of his own home, and it's taken the form of a fever. Give him not just one remedy, give him thousands — even if you have the Civil Surgeon examine him — but no medicine's going to have any effect.'

'But sister, who drove him out of his home? I sent him there only because I was concerned about his studies.'

'For whatever reason you sent him there, it has hurt him. I don't count for anything anymore, I have no right to speak up about anything. You're the master and your wife is the mistress. I'm only a poor widow who depends on you for support. Who'd listen to me? Who'd care? But I can't stand not speaking my mind. Mansaram will be well when he comes home — when your heart becomes once again what it used to be.'

With that, Rukmini left them. She understood full well the mystery of the events happening before her dim but experienced eyes and all her wrath descended on the innocent Nirmala. At this moment she had come close to saying that so long as this Lakshmi continued to dwell in the house, its condition would go from bad to worse. But even though she had not said so openly, the meaning did not fail to register on Munshiji. When she had gone he raised his head and began to reflect. At this instant he was so furious with himself that he wanted to dash his head against the wall and end his life. Why had he remarried? What need had there been? God had given him not one but three sons. He'd almost reached fifty — so why had he remarried?

Or was all this the means God had chosen to destroy him? He looked up and glanced once at Nirmala's smiling but immobile

features and left for the hospital. Her smiling beauty had pacified his spirit. Today for the first time in days he had attained this kind of peace. Can a heart tormented by love remain so tranquil and unwavering in such a situation? No, never — the heart's wound cannot be concealed by any trickery. At this moment he fretted a great deal over this weakness of spirit. Without any cause at all he had given suspicion a place in his heart and created this great catastrophe. His heart had been freed of doubt toward Mansaram also. But in its place a new suspicion had grown. Had Mansaram guessed? And wasn't he refusing to come home only because he'd guessed? If he had guessed, then there would be a disaster. The imagining jolted his heart, every bone in his body seemed desperate to do away with this torment.

He ordered the coachman to speed up. Today at last the dense cloud shrouding his emotions had dispersed and waves of light were striving to emerge from within. He stuck his head out and looked to see if the coachman was sleeping. The horse's gait had never seemed so slow to him. When he reached the hospital he ran immediately into Mansaram and found the doctor standing before him, deep in troubled thought. Munshiji was so upset that he was unable to utter a single word. With the greatest difficulty in an unsteady voice he managed to ask, 'How is he, Doctor?' and at once burst into tears. When the doctor hesitated for a moment in answering his question his heart sank. He sat on the bed, gathered the unconscious boy in his arms and began to sob like a child. His body was burning like a hot plate. Once Mansaram opened his eyes. Oh, how frightful and how pathetic was that glance! Munshiji hugged his son and asked the doctor, 'How is he, sir? Why are you silent?'

Indecisively, the doctor said, 'You can see for yourself how he is. He has a temperature of 106 degrees. What else can I tell you? Right now the temperature is rising. I'm doing whatever I can. God is the only hope! Since you went away I haven't stirred one minute from this spot, I haven't eaten my dinner. His condition is so critical that there's no telling what might happen any minute. This is a very high fever; he's not conscious at all. The delirium is gradually running its course. Did someone at home make him unhappy? Time and time again he keeps calling out, *"Ammaji,* where are you?" '

The doctor had hardly finished when Mansaram suddenly got up, rushed Munshiji off the charpoy and raved at him, 'Why are you threatening? Kill, kill, kill right now! Can't you find the sword? Is there a noose for hanging or can't you find that either? I'll twist it around my neck! Alas, *Ammaji,* where are you?' And then he fell back unconscious once more.

For a moment Munshiji stared with anguished eyes at the limp figure, then suddenly he seized the doctor's hand and entreated him, 'Doctor save this boy, for God's sake, save him, otherwise it will be the end of me. I'm not rich, but whatever you ask I'll give you, only save him. Please call in the senior-most specialists and get their opinion. I — I'll pay for everything, I can't bear to see him like this. Oh, my promising son!'

Sympathetically, the doctor said, 'Sir, I'm truthfully telling you that I've spared no effort for him. Now you ask me to get the opinion of other doctors. Very well, I'll send for Doctor Lahiri, Doctor Bhatia and Doctor Mathur right away. I'm also requesting Vinayak Shastri, but I don't wish to give you any false hopes. His condition is critical.'

Weeping, Munshiji said, 'No doctor, don't even say such a thing. May the condition of his enemies be critical! God surely won't deal so harshly with me. Send a wire to the doctors in Calcutta and Bombay, I'll serve you for the rest of my life. He's the light of our clan, the mainstay of my life. My heart is breaking. Give him some medicine that will bring him back to consciousness. Let me just hear with my own ears what exactly is the matter with him. Oh, my son!'

'Please take a little comfort — you're an elderly man, lamenting like this and assembling a whole army of doctors will have no effect at all. Be calm and sit down, please. I'm calling the doctors of the city, let's see what they say. But you've been getting hysterical, you know.'

'Very well, doctor,' said Munshiji, 'I'll say no more, I won't even open my mouth. Do whatever you wish, the child is in your hands. Only you can save him. All I want is simply for him to regain consciousness and recognise me and understand what I say. Isn't there some medicine to revive him? — so I could say a few words to him.' Then, in great agitation, he addressed Mansaram, 'Son, please

open your eyes, what's wrong with you? I'm sitting beside you, weeping. I don't have any complaints against you, my feelings for you are absolutely clean.'

'You've begun to rave again,' said the doctor. 'Come now, you're not a child, you're an adult, face the situation with courage.'

'Very well, doctor, I'll say no more, I'm sorry. Do whatever you like, I leave everything to you now. But isn't there some way that I can at least explain to him that my heart is clean about him? You tell him yourself, doctor, tell him, "Your unlucky father is sitting here, weeping. He bears you no ill will, he was misled, but now the delusion has been dispelled." That's all, just tell him that. I want nothing more, I'll sit here and be quiet, I won't so much as open my mouth. But please, *you* tell him what I've said.'

'For God's sake sir, have a little patience, otherwise I shall be compelled to ask you to go home. I'm just going to my office to write to the other doctors. Please sit here and be quiet.'

Cruel doctor! What father could see his son in this condition and bear up with fortitude? By nature Munshiji was a highly serious individual. He also knew that at this moment weeping and lamentation would have no result; but nevertheless it was impossible at this moment for him to sit quietly. If this illness had been brought about by pure chance he could have remained tranquil, consoled others, himself summoned the doctors. But how could he remain tranquil when he knew that he himself had started the whole trouble? Right now he was utterly disgusted with himself. He thought, 'Why did this evil idea spring up in me? Why did I ever conceive such a dreadful thought without any tangible evidence? Well then, what should I have done in that situation?' He could not decide what else he might have done. In reality, to fall into the trap of marriage had been a blunder. Yes, this was the root of the trouble.

'But I did nothing so out of the ordinary! All men and women marry and they live happily. We marry only with a desire for happiness. In my part of the town hundreds of men marry a second, a third, a fourth, even a seventh time and even when they're older than me. And as long as they live, they have an easy, pleasant

existence. And not all of them die before their wives, either. How many become widowers even after a second or third marriage! If everybody were in a situation like mine. then who would even talk of marriage? My father remarried in his fiftieth year and he couldn't have been less than sixty when I was born. Of course it's true that there have been some changes between then and now. Women never used to be educated. Whatever sort of husband they had, they regarded him as worthy of adoration. Or maybe that men saw everything going on but bore it all without any sense of shame. If a young man cannot remain contented with an old woman, then why would a young woman be contented with some old man?

'But I'm not all that old. Looking at me no one would think that I'm past 40. Whatever the case, in marrying a young woman when youth is on the wane, there is surely some indecency involved, of that there's no doubt. By nature woman is modest. Whores of course are different. Generally a woman is much more restrained than man. After she's found a proper husband she may laugh and joke with another man but her heart remains pure. If she's mismatched, then even though she never looks at another man, her spirit goes down. The first woman is a solid wall which the thief's chisel cannot break, but the second is a makeshift wall and remains intact only so long as no thief tries to break in.'

Occupied with these reflections Munshiji dozed off. The reflections changed into a dream. He saw his first wife standing in front of Mansaram and saying, 'My lord, what have you done? This son whom I had nourished with my own blood you have murdered so cruelly! You stigmatised such a good-charactered boy. Now what are you sitting there wailing about? You've washed your hands off him! I'm taking him away from your cruel hands. You never used to be so suspicious. Did suspicion take hold of you as soon as you remarried? Such a harsh blow on this tender heart! Such a hideous stain! Only a shameless person could endure such a disgrace and go on living! My son cannot endure it.' Saying this, she lifted up the boy to her bosom and departed. When Munshiji, in tears, stretched out his hands to drag Mansaram away from her, his eyes opened and half a dozen doctors including Dr Lahiri, Dr Bhatia and others appeared before him.

12

Three days passed and Munshiji did not return home. Rukmini would go both morning and evening to see Mansaram. Both the brothers went too, but how could Nirmala go? — It was as though both her feet were shackled. She yearned to know the state of Mansaram's illness, but if she asked Rukmini anything she was answered with abuse, while if she asked the boys their answers were confused. She was tormented by the desire to go just once herself to see him, but she feared lest suspicion cooled Munshiji's affection for his son — or was it only his stinginess that presented an obstacle to Mansaram's recovery? Doctors are nobody's friends, they care only for money, whether the corpse goes to hell or to paradise.

Her first impulse was to go to the hospital and give the doctor a purse of a thousand rupees and say, 'Save him! This purse is your reward.' But she had neither enough money nor boldness. Even now if she could be there Mansaram would recover. The kind of service and attention which she could give him was what he required, but he wasn't getting it, for otherwise would not his fever have come down in three days? This was not a fever of the body but one of the mind and only by soothing his spirit would its intensity abate. If she could stay with him all through the night without Munshiji taking it ill, then perhaps Mansaram would be convinced that his father held nothing against him, and then his recovery would follow without delay. But could this be? If Munshiji saw her there, could he be easy in his mind?

Was his heart even now free of suspicion? When he went off to the hospital it seemed that he was repenting for his error. She was afraid lest her visit flared up his suspicion again and ended up by killing him.

Three days went by in the dilemma; the kitchen fire at home was not lit nor did anyone eat. *Puris*[37] were brought from the market for the boys, while Rukmini and Nirmala went to sleep hungry. They had no appetite at all.

On the fourth day Jiyaram came home from school, after visiting the hospital on the way. Nirmala asked him, 'Tell me, my dear, did you also go to the hospital? How is he today? Has your brother got out of bed or not?'

Jiyaram started to cry and said, '*Ammaji,* today he didn't say a single word. He was twisting and turning violently on his charpoy without making a sound.'

The colour drained off Nirmala's face. Distressed, she asked, 'Wasn't your father there?'

'Of course he was. He cried a lot today.'

Nirmala's heart began to pound. She asked, 'Weren't the doctors there?'

'The doctors were there too, advising one another on what to do. The most important one, the Civil Surgeon, was saying in English that they ought to give the patient a blood transfusion. When he heard that, *Babuji* said, 'Take as much blood as you need from me.' The Civil Surgeon laughed and said, 'Your blood wouldn't be of any use. We need a young person's blood.' Finally, he injected some medicine into elder brother's arm. The needle must have been at least two inches long, but brother didn't make any sound at all. But I was so scared that I had to shut my eyes.'

Great resolutions are born only in moments of passion. While Nirmala had been terrified before, now the lustre of a firm resolve shone on her face. She had decided to give her own fresh blood. If this could save Mansaram's life, then she would gladly give away her

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[37] Small *chapatties* fried in clarified butter instead of being roasted on grills.

last drop. People could think whatever they pleased, she would not care in the least. She said to Jiyaram. 'Run and call an *ekka*. I'm going to the hospital.'

'There'll be a lot of people there right now,' said Jiyaram. 'Wait until it's night, won't you?'

'No, go and call an *ekka* right away.'

'What if father gets angry?'

'Let him,' said Nirmala. 'Now go at once and get a carriage.'

'I'll tell that *Ammaji* made me call a carriage.'

'Then tell him!'

During the short time Jiyaram was gone to get a carriage Nirmala combed her hair, made it into a bun, changed her clothes, put on her jewels, chewed a *pan* and went and stood in the doorway to wait for the carriage.

Rukmini was sitting in her room. When she saw Nirmala sitting ready, she asked, 'Where are you going, *Bahu?*'

'I'm just going to the hospital,' said Nirmala.

'What are your going to do there?'

'Nothing — what could I do? Anyway, God is the one who does. I want to see him.'

'I'm telling you not to go.'

Humbly, Nirmala said, '1 *am* going and right now, *Didiji,* Jiyaram has been telling me that Mansaram is in a bad shape now. I feel a little nervous so won't you come along too?'

'I've already seen him,' said Rukmini. 'You better understand that his only hope is a transfusion of blood — but why would anyone donate it since that would be risking his own life'

'But that's why I'm going. Won't my blood be effective?'

'Why shouldn't it? It has to be only from somebody young, but if Mansaram's life is saved by your blood, it would be far better that he should just lose it.'

The *tonga*[38] arrived. Nirmala and Jiyaram got in and they started out. Rukmini stood in the doorway crying for a long time. Today for the first time she felt sorry for Nirmala. If she had had her way she would have held her back by force. Indistinctly she was beginning to see where an excess of compassion and sympathy was taking the girl. Unfortunately, it was an ill-starred impulse, the way to destruction.

The lamps were already lit when Nirmala reached the hospital. The doctors had finished their consultation and taken their leave. Mansaram's fever had come down slightly. He was staring constantly at the door, his look fixed on the boundless sky, as though he were waiting for some god. As for where he was, he had no idea at all.

When suddenly he saw Nirmala he sat up, astonished, his trance broken. Light dawned in his wandering mind, he became aware of his situation, his condition, as though remembering something long forgotten. He screwed up his eyes to peer at Nirmala, then turned his face away.

Of a sudden Munshiji said harshly, 'What have you come here for?'

Nirmala was speechless. Could she tell why she had come? Could she even answer so direct a question? Why had she come? How could anyone be asked so thorny a question? A member of the household was sick, she had come to see him — could not this be understood without asking? Then why this question?

She stood completely stunned, as though she had lost consciousness. Having heard from the two boys about Munshiji's grief and distress she had concluded that his heart was now free of resentment. Now she was discovering that this was an error. Oh yes, a very great error. Had she known that even a rain of tears could not extinguish the fire of his suspicions she would never have come. She might have died of grief but she would never have set foot outside the house.

Once more he asked her: 'Why have you come?'

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[38]Horse carriage.

Nirmala answered with confidence, 'What have *you* come here for?'

Munshiji's nostrils flared. Furious, he got up from the charpoy and, seizing Nirmala's hand, said, 'There's no need for you to be here. When I send for you, come, do you understand?'

Lord! What a calamity! Mansaram, who before had not been able to stir from the charpoy, got up and falling at Nirmala's feet in tears said, *'Ammaji,* how much sorrow this unlucky one has given you all for nothing! I will never forget your affection. My only prayer to God is that my next birth will be in your womb, so that I may repay my debt to you. God knows, I never considered you a stepmother, I've thought of you as my own mother. Though you're not much older than me you took the place of my mother and that's the way I've always regarded you. I can say no more, *Ammaji,* forgive me, this is the last time we'll meet.'

Holding back the flood of her tears Nirmala said, 'Why are you saying such things? In a few days you'll be well again.'

In a faint voice Mansaram said, 'I have no desire to live now and no strength to speak.' With this he turned much weaker and lay down on the floor. Nirmala looked fearlessly at her husband and said, 'What do the doctors advise?'

'They've all gone out of their minds,' said Munshiji. 'They say he needs a blood transfusion.'

'Would that save his life?'

Munshiji regarded Nirmala with hostile eyes and said, 'I'm not God nor do I consider the doctor God.'

'A blood transfusion,' said Nirmala, 'is really not so hard to get.'

'And I suppose neither are the stars on the sky. It's easy enough to talk about jumping across the ditch!'

Nirmala said, 'I'm ready to donate my blood. Please call the doctor.'

Munshiji was astounded. 'You?'

'Yes! Don't you think my blood will serve the purpose?'

'You'd give your blood? No, it's not needed — your life would be in danger.'

'When else will my life be of any use?'

With tears in his eyes, Munshiji said, 'No, Nirmala, just this minute you've gone up very high in my esteem. Until today your life was something for my enjoyment, from now on you'll be the object of my devotion. I've been unjust to you. Forgive me.'

13

The inevitable happened and no one could help it. The doctor was just drawing Nirmala's blood when Mansaram with the last glimmer of his shining character took his leave of this world of illusion and deception. Perhaps he had held on to life this long only waiting for Nirmala. Before he had proved her innocent how could he give up his life? Now he had accomplished his purpose. Munshiji had been convinced that Nirmala was innocent — but when? — only when the arrow had left the bow, when the traveller had already set out on his journey.

Out of grief for his son Munshiji's life had become a burden. From that day on a smile never came to his lips. This existence seemed mere vanity to him. He would go to court not to plead cases, but rather for diversion. After an hour or two he would get bored and come away. When he sat down to eat he would hardly swallow a morsel. Nirmala would cook the finest food but Munshiji could not get more than few bites down. It seemed as though each bit of food was rejected by his mouth. As soon as he went to Mansaram's room his heart would contract with pain. Where once the lamp of his hopes burned, darkness prevailed. He still had two sons, but when the milch cow has died how can one put any hope in the heifer? When the flowering, fruit-bearing tree has fallen, what to hope from the seedlings? Even though both young and old die, his grief came from the fact that he himself had caused his son's death. Any moment he remembered this it seemed that his breast would burst and his heart leap out.

Nirmala felt a genuine sympathy for her husband. She did as much as was possible to keep him cheered up and not even by default would she bring up the subject of past events. Munshiji was ashamed to talk with her about Mansaram. From time to time he would feel an urge to open up once for all his heart to her, but shame stopped his tongue. And so he did not even find that consolation that comes from pouring out one's anguish and sharing one's grief with others. Unable to escape, the poison spread deep within; day-by-day his body wasted away.

In the meantime a friendship had sprung up between Munshiji and the doctor who had treated Mansaram. The poor fellow would come from time to time to console Munshiji, sometimes he would drag him along with him to enjoy a walk in the open. His wife also came a few times to visit Nirmala, and Nirmala had more than once returned her visit; but when she came home from there she always felt depressed for several days. When she saw the happy life of this married couple it was impossible for her not to be saddened by her own situation. The doctor earned a total of 200 rupees a month, but with so little the two of them enjoyed a blissful life. They had only one maid in the house and the wife often had to do much of the housework herself. She also wore very little jewellery, but between the two of them was that love which didn't care a fig for wealth. When she saw her husband the wife's face would light up, and when he saw her he showed his happiness.

There was far more wealth in Nirmala's house; she was weighed down with jewels and was never obliged to do any housework. But though rich Nirmala was sad, and Sudha despite being poor was happy. Sudha possessed something which Nirmala lacked compared to which her own wealth appeared trivial, so much so that she was embarrassed to wear jewels when she visited Sudha.

One day when Nirmala went to the doctor's house, Sudha, seeing her so down-hearted asked her, 'Sister, you're sad today — is *Vakil Sahib* not feeling well?'

'What can I say, Sudha?' Nirmala replied. 'Day by day his health is deteriorating. It's impossible to describe his condition. Who knows what God wills?'

'My husband says that it's necessary for him to go for a change of climate, otherwise some serious illness may attack him. He's told *Vakil Sahib* several times already, but he just keeps on saying that he's fine and has no complaints. Now *you* tell him.'

'If he won't listen to the doctor, why would he listen to me?'

Saying this, her eyes dimmed with tears. And she suddenly gave voice to the suspicion which had troubled her for some months. She said, 'Sister, the symptoms don't seem to be good for me[39]. Let us see what God wills.'

'Then today you must insist that he has a change of climate. Staying away for a few months will help him to forget many things. As I understand it, even just by changing his residence his grief will diminish somewhat. But you won't be able to travel anywhere at all. Which month is it?'

'It's the eighth month. Worry about *this* has made me despair even more. I never asked God for it, I don't know why I'm made to suffer this calamity. How unlucky I am! Sister, my father died one month before I was to be married. From the moment he died I've been under an unlucky star. The people who'd agreed to the marriage broke their agreement. There was nothing my mother could do except arrange this marriage for me. Now my younger sister is of an age to be married — let's see where fate would lead her to.'

'But why did those people who'd agreed to the marriage refuse?'

'Only they could tell you. With my father gone, who was there to give them a heap of gold?'

'But that's vile,' said Sudha. 'Where did they live?'

'In Lucknow. I don't remember their name, but the father was some high official in the excise department.

Sudha looked grave. 'And what did their son do?'

'Nothing. He was studying somewhere, but he had good prospects.'

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[39] Apparently indicating that she is pregnant.

Lowering her eyes, Sudha said, 'Didn't he protest to his father? He was a grown-up young man — couldn't he have made his father hold to the agreement?'

'Oh, sister, what do I know about all that? Is there anybody who doesn't want a heap of gold? The *pandit*[40] who took the message from our house to them said that the boy himself had refused, although his mother was a really decent woman. She tried to bring both son and father around, but she failed.'

'If I could find that young fellow I'd give him a piece of my mind!'

'What happened was written in my fate. I wonder now what will happen to my sister, poor Krishna.'

When that evening, after Nirmala had left, the doctor came home, Sudha said to him, 'Tell me, what would you say to a man who, after agreeing to a marriage with one girl, married someone else because he was impelled by greed?'

Watching his wife curiously, Dr Sinha said, 'Of course, he ought not to do anything of the sort — greatest vileness? — the very lowest kind of behaviour?'

'Of course I wouldn't object to describing it like that. Whose offence is worse, the bridegroom's or the father's?'

Dr Sinha still did not understand what Sudha was leading up to.

Surprised, he said, 'It depends on the circumstances. If the son is dependent on his father, then I would consider it the father's offence.'

'Even if he's dependent on his father, doesn't a young man have any obligation of his own? If he needs a new coat then even though the father objects he'll moan and groan and have it made anyway. So in such an important matter can't he make his father listen to him? Let's agree that the groom and his father are both culpable, but the son most of all. The old man thinks: I'll have to bear the whole

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[40] Priest.

expense; I'll squeeze as much as I can out of the bride's family, but it's the groom's duty — if he hasn't sold out completely to selfish aims — to make his spiritual power felt. If he doesn't, then I say that he's greedy and cowardly as well. Unfortunately, just such a creature is my husband and I can't conceive of what words to use to rebuke him.'

Embarrassed, Sinha said, 'That...that...that was a different matter. There was no question of bargaining, it was quite another matter. The girl's father had died. In such a situation what could we do? It had also come to our attention that the girl had some serious defect. It was altogether another matter. But who told you this?'

'Say that the girl was one-eyed or hunchbacked or born of the lowest caste or a fallen woman! Why'd you leave out those defects? Well then, let's hear it — just what was wrong with the girl?'

'I never saw her,' said Sinha. 'But we'd heard that there *was* a defect.'

'Her greatest defect was simply this: her father had passed away and she couldn't bring you any great fortune. Why are you shy about admitting it? Do you think I'm not going to have it on you? If I make one or two sarcastic remarks, listen with one ear and let it out by the other. If you think I'm too abusive you can always resort to the stick. After all, a woman's kept in line only by kicks and sticks. If there was anything at all wrong with that girl, then I'll declare that even Lakshmi herself is not without blemish! Your destiny was at fault, nothing more — how else to explain it? You were destined to fall into my clutches.'

'Who told you that it happened this way or that way? Just the way you heard it from somebody and accepted it. Well, we also heard what we heard from somebody else and believed it.'

'It's not just hearsay that makes me believe it. I've seen her with my own eyes. I'll describe her only by saying that I've never before seen so beautiful a woman.'

Disturbed, Sinha asked, 'Why, is she somewhere around here? Tell the truth, where did you see her? Has she come to your house?'

'Yes, she's come to my house,' said Sudha, 'and not once but many times, and I've often gone to hers. *Vakil Sahib's* wife is the same girl you abandoned because of her defects.'

'Truly!'

'Absolutely. If she ever found out that you were that fine gentleman then probably she'd never set foot in this house again. I doubt if there can be more than two or three women in this city so virtuous, so skilled in running a house and of such great beauty. You often praise my looks, but I'm not even fit to be her maid. God may bestow everything upon a house, but when the couple themselves are not well matched, then despite everything else how can they get along? It's only thanks to her strength of character that she's spending the days of her life with that decrepit old lawyer. I would long since have taken poison. But on the surface you can hardly tell how miserable she is. She laughs, talks, wears jewels and fine clothes, but inside she's weeping all the time.'

'I suppose she complains a lot about the lawyer?'

'Why should she complain? Isn't he her husband? The only thing she has in the world is *Vakil Sahib*. Whether he's old or sick, he's there and he's her husband. Women of good birth do not criticise their husbands — only sluts do that. Nirmala may grieve over her situation but she never says one word about it.'

'What could this lawyer have been dreaming of to go and marry at his age?'

'If there weren't men like him,' said Sudha, 'then who would rescue improverished girls in impossible situations? Since you and the likes of you won't consider marriage without a pile of money, where can these unlucky women turn to? You've committed a grave injustice and you've got to atone for it. May God at least keep her husband alive forever! But if something should happen to him the poor girl's whole life will be utterly ruined. She was crying a lot today. You people are really terribly heartless. For my part, I'll see that my Sohan is married to a girl with no money.'

The doctor did not hear that last sentence; he was immersed in intense thought. The question kept coming back to torment him: what if something did happen to the lawyer? He realised now how very selfish he had been. For in truth the offence had been his own. If he'd insisted to his father that he wouldn't marry anyone else, then surely they would not have married him to another woman against his wishes. Suddenly Sudha said, 'If you like, I'll introduce you to Nirmala. Let her have a look at you, too. Although she won't say a word, maybe with just a look she'll reproach you so severely that you'll never be able to forget it. Tell me, shall I bring you together tomorrow? I'll be very brief in introducing you to her.'

Sinha said, 'No, Sudha, I beg you don't do anything so perverse or, believe me, I'll leave the house and run away.'

'Why are you so afraid of tasting the bitter fruit of the tree you've planted? Just see the torment of one whom you have injured. My grandfather gave Rs.5000, didn't he? And now when your younger brother marries, the family will pick up another five or six thousand. There'll be nobody in the world richer than your family. Eleven thousand is a lot of money. Bravo, bravo! It would take months just to pick it all up and store it away. Even if the children began to squander it, it would last for three generations. Have they been planning his marriage or not?'

The doctor was so shamed by this sarcasm that he could not even lift his head. All his skill with words deserted him. He looked as crestfallen as though he'd just got a beating. Just then someone called for the doctor from outside, and the poor fellow ran for his life. Today for the first time he had discovered his wife's gift for sarcasm.

When he went to bed that night he said to Sudha, 'Nirmala has a sister, doesn't she?'

'Yes, she was talking about her only this afternoon. She's worried about her right now. As for herself, what's happened has happened; now she has her sister to worry about. Her mother has been left with nothing, so they'll probably be obliged to hand the girl over to just the same sort of old man.'

'But Nirmala is in a position to help her mother now.'

With some bitterness, Sudha said, 'At times you talk utter nonsense. The most Nirmala could give her sister would be two or three hundred rupees, no more than that. The lawyer's in a bad situation right now; she still has a long life ahead of her. Anyway, who knows what state their finances are in? For six months now the poor man has been sitting idle at home. Rupees do not rain down from the sky, you know! If he's got even ten or twenty thousand they're doubtless in the bank, Nirmala herself won't have anything much in her own keeping. When we spend two hundred rupees a month do you think they'll spend less than four hundred?' After this Sudha fell asleep but the doctor tossed and turned for a long time. Then he made up his mind: he got up, sat at the table and began to write a letter.

14

Three things happened all at once: Nirmala's daughter was born, Krishna's marriage was arranged and Munshi Totaram's house put up for auction. The birth of the daughter was a commonplace matter, although in Nirmala's eyes this was the greatest event of her whole life; but the other two were not at all ordinary. How was Krishna's marriage arranged with a wealthy household? Her mother did not have even a penny to offer as dowry; and for his part old Sinha, who was living on a pension, was notorious in his community for his avarice. How did he come to agree to his son's marriage into an impoverished household? At first no one could believe it. An even bigger surprise was Munshiji auctioning off his house. People did not think he was a millionaire, but assumed that he was surely a wealthy man. How had the auctioning of his house come about? What had happened was that Munshiji had borrowed some money from a usurer to take out a mortgage on a village. He hoped that in a year or a year and a half he would pay off his debt. Then in another five or so years he would get the possession of the village when the zamindar would fail to pay off the money of principal and interest. Counting on this, Munshiji had undertaken the business. The village was very large — there was an annual profit of four to five hundred rupees, but what Munshiji had calculated in his head remained right there. Even though he tried to persuade himself, he could not go to the court. Grief for his son left in him no capacity to do any work at all. What father could be so heartless as to keep his cool after causing his son's death?

When for a whole year no interest reached the usurer and Munshiji did not go to him even when summoned many times — even finally saying that he was nobody's slave and *Sahuji*[41] could do whatever he pleased — *Sahuji* got angry. He filed a lawsuit. Munshiji did not even appear to contest it. A decree for recovery was passed against him. And where was money kept in reserve at home? In the meantime Munshiji had lost his credit-worthiness: he could not muster resources for the payments. Finally, the house was put up for auction. Nirmala was still in the lying-in room at that moment. When she heard the news her heart sank. Although she had known no happiness in her life, at least she had been free from worry over lack of money. If money is not the most important thing in man's life it certainly is very close to being so. Along with all the other things she lacked, now she was tormented by this worry. She sent the midwife to tell Munshiji to sell all her jewels and save the house, but under no circumstances would he agree to this suggestion.

From that day on Munshiji plunged into deeper anxiety. The pleasures of wealth which he wanted to enjoy by marrying again, were now only a memory of the past. He was so remorseful that now he could not even show his face to Nirmala. He was now aware of the injustice he had done to her, and the birth of the daughter completed it, indeed it brought about absolute ruin.

On the twelfth day Nirmala came out of the lying-in room holding her baby and went to her husband. Even in this hour of poverty she was as content as though she had no worries at all. When she pressed the child to her heart she forgot all her cares. She was thrilled when she saw the child's big eyes lit up with pleasure. In this blossoming of motherhood all her sorrow disappeared. She wanted to find some gratification when she saw the child in her husband's lap, but Munshiji went into a panic at the sight of the little girl. He experienced no pleasure in taking her into his lap but looked at her once with eyes full of pity and then bowed his head. The child bore a striking resemblance to Mansaram.

Nirmala interpreted his feelings quite differently. She hugged the child with boundless affection as though to say to Munshiji, 'If you feel she's a burden, then from this day on I won't let even your shadow

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[41] A title of respect for a merchant.

to fall across her. Doesn't it break your heart to show disrespect to this jewel which I've won with so much suffering?' Hiding the child she went that very moment back to her room and wept for a long time. She made not the slightest effort to understand this indifference of her husband, otherwise she might not have thought him so hard-hearted. After all, she did not have to bear the heavy burden of responsibility which had fallen on him. If she had applied her mind, could she not have understood it at all? In one instant Munshiji became aware of his mistake. The mother's heart was so involved in love that she did not fear in the least the future obstacles confronting them. Deep inside she was experiencing a supernatural power which overcame all the trials before them. Understanding, Munshiji went running to her room and taking the child to his breast said, 'She reminds me so much of Mansa, she's just like him!'

'*Didi* also thinks so,' said Nirmala.

'Absolutely the same huge eyes and red lips. God has given Mansaram back to me in this form. The same forehead, the same mouth, the same hands and feet — God, your ways are fathomless!'

Suddenly Rukmini too came in. As soon as she saw Munshiji she said, 'Look, *Babu*, is it Mansaram or not? He's come back. No matter whatever others say I'll not agree. She is just like Mansaram! It's been just about a year of his demise.'

'Sister, they're alike in every feature. The Lord has given me back my Mansaram, that's all there is to it.' To the child Munshiji said, 'Well, then, are you really Mansaram? Don't even think of going off and leaving me or I'll pull you back! How cruel you were to run away like that! But at last I've caught you, haven't I? Enough! I've told you now, don't even think of leaving me again. Look, sister, just see how she's staring at me!'

From that very moment Munshiji began again to build the palace of his ambitions. Attachment drew him back once more towards this world. Human life! How momentary you are, but how long-lasting your fantasies! The same Totaram who had been growing disenchanted from the world, who day and night had been inviting death, now clung to a straw to get safely back to the shore.

But does anyone get safely to the shore aided only by a straw?

15

Although for Nirmala there was no let-up in the tribulations of her household, when she got the news of Krishna's upcoming wedding she could not remain at home. Her mother had summoned her most insistently. She was most fascinated by the fact that her sister's marriage was to be with a member of that household where her own wedding had originally been planned. Most surprising, how had these people agreed to arrange a marriage without taking any dowry at all? Nirmala had been terribly concerned for Krishna, anticipating that like herself the girl would be thrust on to anybody willing to take her. She had wanted very much to help her mother in finding some appropriate bridegroom for Krishna, but there was *Vakil Sahib* sitting idle at home and because of the usurer's lawsuit her hands were tied. Given such a situation, she was very relieved on getting the news. She made preparations for her journey and Munshiji accompanied her to the station. He was extremely fond now of the little girl and would not let go of her, to the point where he was ready to go with Nirmala, but she did not consider it fitting for him to move in on his in-laws one month before the wedding.

Until now Nirmala had not told her mother the story of her misfortunes. What was the point of weeping and distressing her mother and making her weep as well over something already done with? And so her mother had been assuming that Nirmala was perfectly happy. But now when she saw how Nirmala looked it was

as though she had been struck in the heart. Girls do not come from their husband's home emaciated, so what then was going on with Nirmala? How many girls she'd seen who went to their husbands' homes looking like little new moons only to come back like full moons! She had been imagining that Nirmala's complexion would have grown more lustrous, her figure filled out, every inch of her gaining in splendour. But when she saw her now the girl had diminished by half. She had neither the vivacity of youth nor that full bloom that ravishes the heart. There was not a trace of that radiance, that delicacy which comes from a life of luxury. Her face was sallow, her carriage slumped, her limbs flaccid — at nineteen she had become an old woman. After mother and daughters had had a good cry together, the mother asked, 'But what on earth's the matter, don't you get anything to eat? You were in much better shape when you were here. Are you having troubles there?'

Krishna laughed and said, 'Were you the mistress of the house there or not? The mistress has a whole world of worries — when does she have time to eat?'

'No, *Amma,* just that the water there didn't agree with me so that I kept ailing.'

'Munshiji will come when we invite him, won't he? Then I'll ask him, "You took away this girl who was like a flower — how did you get her into a condition like this?" Very well, now tell me, why did you send me money? I never asked for any from you. I may be absolutely broke, but I'm not likely to live off my daughter's money.'

Nirmala was astonished. 'Who sent you money, *Amma?* I certainly didn't.'

'Don't fib,' said her mother. 'Didn't you send me a money order for Rs. 500?'

'If you didn't,' said Krishna, 'then did it fall from the sky? Your name was written quite clearly, and the official stamp was from your town.'

'You have my word, I didn't send any money. When did this happen?'

'It must have been two or two and a half months ago,' said her mother. 'But if you didn't send it then where did it come from?'

'How do I know? But I didn't send it. Since his young son died, Munshiji hasn't even gone to court, and I myself had no money at all — where would I get any?'

'Well, it's very surprising. There's no one else there who's kind to you or especially friendly? Perhaps Munshiji sent it and kept it hidden from you.'

'No, *Amma,* I don't think that's likely.'

'We must find out. I've spent the whole amount on jewellery and clothes for Krishna. It had become very difficult for us here.'

When a dispute arose between the two little brothers and Krishna went off to settle it, Nirmala said to her mother, 'I was amazed when I heard about this marriage. How did it come about, *Amma?*'

'Everybody who's heard about it is simply astonished. I can't understand how those people, who went back on a firm agreement and only out of greed for a few rupees, are now willing to accept this match without taking anything at all. They themselves sent the letter. I wrote back very plainly that I had absolutely nothing to offer by way of dowry and could give them nothing but the girl herself. '

'And didn't they object to that?'

'The *pandit* took the letter to them, then came back and told me that the father was not desirous of accepting anything. He was also somewhat ashamed of breaking his promise that first time. I certainly never expected such generosity from him, but I hear that his eldest son is a real gentleman. After a lot of wrangling he finally got his father to agree.'

'But earlier,' said Nirmala, 'that gentleman too wanted a fat sum, didn't he?'

'Yes, but this time *Panditji* says that he's vexed by the very mention of the word dowry. *Panditji* heard that the young man also felt remorseful for not having gone through with the first marriage

with you. He held off then because of money, and when he did marry he got plenty — only his wife's not to his liking.'

Nirmala was extremely curious to see that man who after having disdained her now wanted to rescue her sister. Repentance, true, but how many people were there who, like him, were ready to repent in this fashion? Nirmala felt impatient to talk with him, to scold him — very gently — to show her matchless beauty and to make him still more regretful. That evening the two sisters slept in the same room. They talked for a long time about which neighbourhood girls had got married, which had children, whose wedding was celebrated with great pomp, what girls had found husbands to their liking, which bridegroom had brought how many and what kind of jewels to his bride. Krishna wanted time and again to ask her sister about her new home, but Nirmala gave her no opportunity to ask. She realised that what Krishna would ask about she would feel ashamed to answer. One time Krishna did blurt out a question: 'My brother-in-law will come too, won't he?' 'He said he would.'

'He's contented with you now, isn't he, or is there still the same old situation? I've often heard that on his second marriage a husband loves his wife more than his very life, but here I guess it's the reverse. What was it, after all, that he was angry with you about?'

'How can I tell what another person feels in his heart?'

'I think he must have been annoyed by your bluntness. You were angry when you left this house. When you got there you must have said something nasty to him.'

'It's not that at all, Krishna, I swear that I felt nothing bad toward him. I've served him as well as I can. If there had been some God in his place I couldn't have done anything more for him. And he loves me too. Often he looks at me with admiration — but what can either of us do about things that are out of our control? He can't be young, nor can I be an old woman. I can't tell you how many potions and elixirs he's taken to make himself young, and I, to make myself old, have given up milk and ghee and everything. I thought my being thin would somehow reduce the difference in our ages, but neither has he

had any advantage from nourishing food nor I from my fasting. Since Mansaram died his condition has gone even worse.'

'You were very fond of Mansaram, weren't you?'

'He was the kind of boy everyone loved as soon as they saw him. I've never seen such languorous eyes on anybody; and a face like an ever-blooming lotus. And so courageous that if the occasion demanded he'd jump into the fire. I tell you truly, Krishna, when he came and sat down close to me I was completely entranced. I only wanted him to be sitting near me always and for me to go on looking at him. There wasn't a glimmer of sinful thought in my mind. May I be struck blind if I ever looked at him with any other kind of feeling. But I can't explain why when I saw him near me my heart was overwhelmed with joy. That was why I invented the pretext of studying, for otherwise he wouldn't even have come into my part of the house. I know that if there had been any sinful intention in his heart I could have done anything and everything for him.'

'Hush, sister! What kind of talk is this!'

'Yes, yes when you hear it said it sounds wicked, and it is wicked, but no one can change a person's nature. You tell me: if you were married to a fifty-year-old man, what would *you* do?'

'Sister, I'd take poison and put myself to sleep — I couldn't even stand looking at him.'

'Well, just understand this: that boy never so much as lifted his eyes to look at me. But the old man is of a terribly suspicious nature. Your brother-in-law became the boy's enemy and didn't relent until he'd brought about his death. From the day Mansaram realised that his father harboured a suspicion of me in his mind he got fever and the fever never came down until it had killed him. Alas, I can't forget the way he looked in those last days. When I went to the hospital he was lying unconscious with fever without even the strength to get up, but as soon as he heard my voice, he was roused and sat up and said, "Mother, mother" — and fell at my feet.' Nirmala began to weep. 'Krishna! All I wanted at that moment was to be able to take my life and give it to him. While he was still at my feet he fainted

and after that never opened his eyes. The doctors had recommended a blood transfusion, and when I heard that I came running, but even while the doctors were getting things ready for the transfusion, he passed away.'

'Would the transfusion have saved him?'

'Who can say? But I was ready to give my last drop of blood. Even in that condition his face glowed like a lamp in the temple. If he hadn't run to fall at my feet as soon as he saw me and had had the transfusion before, then maybe he would have been saved.'

'Then why didn't you make him lie down that very instant?'

'Silly girl, you still haven't understood. By falling at my feet and showing that our relationship was that of mother and son he wanted to drive the suspicion out of his father's heart. That was the only reason he got up. To rid me of my misery he gave his life, and he was successful in his aim. From that day on your brother-in-law has been on decent terms with me. But now I feel sorry for what's happening to him. Grieving for his son is going to kill him. Now he's making up for the injustice he did me. If you saw him now, the way he looks would scare you. He's turned into a really old man, he walks all stooped over.'

'Why are old people so suspicious, sister?'

'You'd better ask the old people.'

'I imagine that in his heart something like a thief[42] keeps lurking, the idea that he won't be able to keep a young woman happy. That's why he's suspicious over the least little thing.'

'If you know,' said Nirmala, 'Why ask me?'

'And so the poor fellow is under his wife's thumb, and people assume most likely that he adores her.'

'Where have you learned so much in such a short time? But let's leave all that aside. Tell me: do you like your bridegroom? You must at least have seen his picture.'

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[42]Some printings have *'Char'* (spying) ubstead of *'chor'* (thief); *'chor'* seems the more likely in this context.

'Yes, his picture's come. Shall I get it and show it to you?'

A moment later Krishna brought the picture and put it in Nirmala's hand. Nirmala smiled and said, 'You're a very lucky girl.'

'*Ammaji* also liked him very much.'

'But do you like him or not? Don't tell me what other people say.'

'He certainly isn't bad-looking,' said Krishna, embarrassed, 'but only God knows what his nature's like. But Shastriji says there can't be many young men so decent and of such good character.'

'Was your picture sent to him?'

'It was Shastriji himself took it.'

'Did he like it?'

'How can I tell what's in someone else's mind? But Shastriji says he was very pleased.'

'All right, now tell me what I should give you so I can start having it made right away.'

'Give whatever you like. He's very fond of books — have some really good books sent.'

'I'm not asking for him, I'm asking for *you*.'

'But I'm telling you what I want.'

Nirmala looked at the picture again. 'He seems to be dressed entirely in *khaddar*[43].'

'Yes, he likes it. I've heard that he carries *khaddar* on his back into the villages to sell it. He's also very good at making speeches.'

'Then you'll have to wear *khaddar* too. Only you don't like coarse material.'

'If he likes rough and coarse material why should I mind it? I've learned to spin, you know.'

'Really! You can spin?'

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[43]Indian homespun cotton cloth.

'I can spin a little, sister. Since he's so very fond of *khaddar* I'll certainly have to manage the spinning wheel. If I couldn't, think of how I'd be shamed.'

After much talk of the sort the two sisters fell asleep. Sometime around two in the night when the baby began to cry Nirmala woke. Then she saw that Krishna's charpoy was empty. Nirmala, surprised, wondered where she could have gone so late in the night. To get a drink of water, perhaps? But a jug of water was there by the head of her bed — so where then could she have gone? She called her name a few times but there was no trace of Krishna. Then Nirmala began to worry; all sorts of suspicions arose in her mind. Suddenly it occurred to her that perhaps she had returned to her own room. When the child was sleeping once more, Nirmala rose and went to the door of Krishna's room. Her guess was correct, Krishna was there. While the whole house was sleeping she was sitting working the spinning wheel. She could not have watched a play with more rapt concentration. Nirmala was astonished. She went in and said, 'What are you doing — is this any time to be spinning?'

Startled, Krishna stood up and said shyly, her eyes cast down, 'What woke you up? I left water there for you.'

'I'm asking you, don't you get enough time during the day that you have to spin into the wee hours?'

'In the day time I don't have any time free for it.'

Nirmala examined the thread. 'This thread's very thin,' she said.

'What do you mean, sister? It's thick. I want to spin a fine thread to make a turban for him. This will be my gift to him.'

'That's a fine idea. What could be more precious in his eyes than this? All right, leave it for now, spin tomorrow. If you make yourself ill all this will come to nothing.'

'No, sister, you go and sleep, I'll be coming soon.'

Nirmala insisted no more and went back to bed. But it was impossible for her to sleep. Seeing this eagerness of her sister, this

rapture, her heart was suddenly stirred by some inexplicable desire. Oh, at this moment how Krishna's heart was blossoming! How intoxicated she'd become by passion. Then Nirmala remembered her own wedding. Since the day she had received the ceremonial mark of marriage she had bid farewell to all her vivacity and all her joyousness. She had sat in her little room and wept over her fate, praying to God that she would end her life. She had waited for her wedding day the way a criminal awaits his punishment: that marriage in which all her life's desires would vanish, when in a ritual fire built under the nuptial pavilion her hopes would burn and turn to ash.

16

The month was not slow in passing, the auspicious moment for the wedding arrived. The house was crowded with guests. One day earlier, Munshi Totaram had arrived from home and with him Nirmala's friend Sudha also came, not particularly because of any insistence on Nirmala's part but because she herself had been eager to come. Nirmala was especially impatient to get a look at the bridegroom's elder brother and, if she had the chance, to thank him for his kindness and wisdom.

Sudha laughed and said, 'Will you really be able to speak to him?'

'Why,' said Nirmala, 'what's the harm in talking? Now we have a different relationship. And if I can't bring myself to speak to him, well, you're here anyway.'

'No, my dear, I can't speak to any man except my husband. Who knows what sort of person this fellow is?'

'He surely isn't a bad person, and you don't have to marry him. What's the harm in just a little conversation? If Doctor Sahib were here I'd ask him to order you.'

'Are people with generous hearts automatically of good characters too? Certain men feel no hesitation about ogling at someone else's wife.'

'Very well,' said Nirmala, 'don't speak to him, I myself will — let him ogle as much as he likes — it's settled, I've made my decision.'

Meantime Krishna came and sat with them. Nirmala smiled and said, 'Tell me truly Krishna, why are you depressed right now?'

Krishna said, 'Brother-in-law is calling, he says go to him first and listen to what he has to say, afterwards you can gossip.'

'What's the matter with him — didn't you ask him?'

'He looks as though he's a little unwell. He's become terribly thin.'

'Then go and sit with him and amuse him. Why did you come running to us? And ask for God's mercy or you might end up with a man just like him. Sit for a while with him and chat. Old men are very amusing to talk to. Young men aren't so.'

'No, sister, you go, I can't bear to sit with him.'

When Nirmala left, Sudha said to Krishna, 'By now the wedding party must be arriving. Won't there be the welcome ceremony for the bridegroom?'

'I don't know, sister. The priest is collecting the things for it.' 'I hear the groom's sister-in-law is a very strict woman.' 'How do you know that?'

'I've heard it, so I'm warning you. You'll have to take a lot of insults.'

'I'm not used to fighting. If she doesn't have any complaint against me, would she get angry without any cause?'

'Yes, I've heard that's just the way she behaves. She invents excuses to fight.'

'If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that humility can turn a stone into wax.'

Suddenly there was a racket: the groom's procession was arriving. The two young women went and sat at the windows. A moment later Nirmala too joined them. She was extremely eager to see the groom's elder brother.

Sudha said, 'How will you be able to tell which one he is?' 'If I ask Shastriji I'll find out. The gentleman on the elephant is Krishna's father-in-law. But look, what is Doctor Sahib doing here — don't you see him, on the horse?'

'Yes, that's him all right.'

'He must be friends with the groom's people. Maybe he's somehow related?'

'I have no idea, but if I meet him I'll ask.'

Said Nirmala, 'The fellow sitting in the palanquin doesn't look like the groom's brother.'

'Not at all. He seems to be nothing but his belly.'

'Who's that on the second elephant? I can't figure it out.'

'Whoever he is he can't be the groom's brother. Don't you see how old he is? He must be over forty.'

'Shastriji's busy with the greeting ceremony, otherwise I'd ask him.'

By chance the barber came along. For the ceremony at the door some rupees were needed right now, and Nirmala had the keys to the money-box. So the mother had sent this barber, who had also accompanied Pandit Moteram to the groom's house for the blessing ceremony.

'Do you need the rupees right now?' Nirmala asked.

'Yes, sister,' said the barber, 'please get them.'

'Very well, I'll do. But tell me, do you know which one is the groom's elder brother?'

'Why not? He's right in front there.'

'Where? I don't see him.'

'But the one riding on the horse — that's him.'

Nirmala was astonished. She said, 'What are you telling me? The groom's brother is on the horse? Do you really recognise him or are you just guessing?'

'Sister, how could I make a mistake? I have to go now to get the things ready for the repast.'

'But that's Doctor Sahib, he's my neighbour.' She turned to Sudha and said, 'Do you hear what he's saying, sister?'

Suppressing her laughter, Sudha said, 'He's lying.'

'Very well, madam,' said the barber, 'I'm lying! Who can counter such important persons these days? I'll go right now and have Shastriji confirm it, then will you believe me?'

As the barber was rather tardy in going back to him, Moteram Shastri himself came into the courtyard and began to raise a hue and cry. 'Only God can save the honour and dignity of this household! The barber's been gone a whole hour and still hasn't got the rupees.'

Nirmala called him, 'Please come over here for a moment, won't you, Shastriji? How many rupees do you need? I'll bring them to you.'

Muttering and panting heavily, Shastriji came up to them and said with a few deep sighs, 'What's wrong? There's no time to chat now, get the money right away.'

'Take them, I'm getting them out. Do you think I'd let the house be dishonoured? But first please tell me, which is the groom's elder brother?'

'Good Lord! Couldn't the barber recognise him?'

'But he says it's the man riding on the horse.'

'And who else should I say it is? He is the one.'

'That's what I've been telling her for an hour,' said the barber, 'but sister won't believe me.'

Nirmala looked at Sudha with a glance of mingled affection, love, pleasure and feigned reproach. She said, 'So you've been deceiving me all the while! If I'd known I wouldn't have invited you. My, you certainly are a deep one! You've been playing this trick on me for months and never once made a slip. But I would have given it away in just a few days.'

'But if you'd known,' said Sudha, 'would you ever have come back to my house?'

'Fantastic! Krishna, now you know your sister-in-law's wickedness. You'd better beware of such a tricky woman.'

'No,' said Krishna, 'I'll worship the very feet of such a goddess. What good fortune just to behold her.'

'Now I understand,' Nirmala went on. '*You* must have had that money sent. If you deny it, I swear I'll beat you.'

'When you invite guests to your home,' said Sudha, 'you shouldn't insult them.'

'But just see how I settle accounts with you. I wrote you only to be polite, and you actually came! And just think what *his* family must be saying.'

'I told them everything when I came.'

'I'll never visit you again. You might at least have given me a hint to keep off the sight of Doctor Sahib. '

'What harm is there in his seeing you? If he hadn't seen you how could he have lamented his fate? How could he have known what he'd lost by giving in to greed? But now that he's seen you the poor man can do nothing but wring his hands with regret. He doesn't say it in so many words but in his heart he's sorry for his mistake.'

'Well, I'll never go to your house,' Nirmala repeated.

'Oh but now you won't be able to get rid of me. Have I ever been one to be slow in going to *your* house?'

The welcome ceremony had ended. The guests were seated, having refreshment. Dr. Sinha was seated beside Munshiji. On the balcony, from behind the chick screen Nirmala watched him and her heart beat fast. He was the very image of vigour, youth and intelligence. But the other one — well, on this subject it was not proper to make any comment.

Nirmala had seen the doctor dozens of times, but the feelings which welled up in her heart today she had never experienced

before. She felt like calling him and taking him to task so roundly that he would never forget it and not let him go until he shed tears. But on second thoughts she felt compassion for him.

By now the wedding guests had gone to their quarters. Preparations for the feast were underway. Nirmala busied herself in arranging trays for the banquet. Suddenly a maid came and said, 'Child, Sudha Rani's asking for you, she's waiting in your room.'

Nirmala put the trays aside and anxiously went to Sudha, but was startled as she stepped into the room: Dr. Sinha was standing there.

Sudha smiled and said, 'Come, sister, I've invited you. Now scold him as much as you please. I'll stand in the door and block it so he can't run away.'

Dr. Sinha said gravely, 'Who's going to run away? I'm standing here with my head bowed.' Nirmala brought her hands together and said, 'Always look upon me kindly like this, and don't forget: that is all I ask.'

17

After Krishna was married Sudha went back home, but Nirmala stayed on in her mother's house. Munshiji wrote many times but she did not return. She felt no desire to leave: there was nothing there to draw her back. Here her time passed happily in doing things for her mother and looking after her younger brothers. If Munshiji himself had come then maybe she would have agreed to return, but during the wedding the neighbourhood girls had so plagued him that he wouldn't even consider coming back. Sudha also wrote often but Nirmala put her off as well. Finally one day Sudha appeared suddenly, accompanied by a servant.

After the two had embraced Sudha said, 'It looks as though you're afraid to come home.'

'Yes, sister, I am,' Nirmala said. 'In the three years since my marriage I've come home only once. I'll end my days here. Who will ask for me and who will come to see me anyway?'

'As for coming back here, there's no problem, come when you want to. But there *Vakil Sahib* is very upset.'

'Upset? I suppose he can't sleep during the nights.'

'Sister, your heart is made of stone. If you saw the state he's in you'd grieve. He says there's no one in the house to care about him, no son, no daughter who might console him. Since he's moved into the other house he's been very depressed.'

'But God gave him two other sons.'

'He complains a lot about both of them. Jiyaram won't listen to anything these days. He talks back rudely. As for the little one, he's completely under Jiya's influence. The poor man remembers his eldest boy and keeps on weeping.'

'Jiyaram was never naughty. Where could he have learned the evil ways? He never made excuses, but on just a hint he did what he was supposed to do.'

'Who knows, sister? I've heard that he tells his father he gave his brother poison and murdered him, he calls him a murderer. And he reproaches him for having married you. He says such awful things that *Vakil Sahib* breaks down and weeps. Well, what else can I tell you? One day Jiya picked up a stone to throw at him.'

After reflecting sadly, Nirmala said, 'The boy has turned out to be a regular devil. Who could have told him his father gave his brother poison?'

'Only you can set him right,' said Sudha.

So here was a new trouble for Nirmala if Jiya was ready to fight with his father, why would he let himself be guided by her? For a long time that night she was troubled about this. At this moment she recalled Mansaram vividly. Had he been alive life would have moved comfortably. If Jiyaram behaved like this right in front of his father, how would he behave with her! They had lost the house, some debt was surely to be repaid. And with such a pitiable income! Only God could see them through it safely. Today for the first time Nirmala was gripped with concern for her daughter. Who could say what lay ahead for the poor child. God had heaped these misfortunes on her. 'I certainly didn't need her,' she thought. If the child had to be born it ought to have been in the house of somebody lucky. The child was sleeping huddled tight against her breast. Her mother hugged her even closer as though someone were trying to tear her away from her.

Sudha's charpoy was very close to Nirmala's. While Nirmala was sinking ever deeper into a sea of worry Sudha was enjoying a

sweet sleep. Was she not tormented by any worries about her own child? Death after all makes no distinction between young and old, so why shouldn't Sudha have worried? But one never saw her sad — with concern for the future. Suddenly she awoke. When she saw that Nirmala was still awake she said, 'My, haven't you fallen asleep yet?'

'I can't sleep,' said Nirmala.

'Just close your eyes and sleep will come automatically. As soon as I lie down on the charpoy I'm as though dead. Even when he wakes me I'm hardly aware of it. I don't know why I sleep so much. Perhaps it's an illness.'

'Yes, a very serious illness! They call it the "royal disease." Tell Doctor Sahib and he'll prescribe a medicine.'

'But finally when I'm awake what should I think of? From time to time I recall my parents' house, then in a little while I just doze off.'

'You don't recall Doctor Sahib?'

'No, why should I? I know that he's probably been playing tennis and that he's eaten his dinner and gone comfortably to bed.'

'Look, your Sohan has also woken. When you're awake he's not likely to fall asleep, is he?'

'Yes, sister, it's a strange habit of his. He sleeps when I sleep and wakes when I do. He must have been a sage in another life. Look, on his forehead there's a mark like a sacred *tilak*[44]. And there are similar marks on his arms. He's definitely some great ascetic.'

'But sages don't put sandal-paste on *tilaks*. In his last birth he must have been some crafty priest. Tell me, Sohan, were you once a priest?'

'I plan to marry him to your little daughter.'

'Go on, sister! That's an insult — how can brother and sister ever marry?'

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[44]A mark worn on the forehead by a Hindu to indicate caste/faith or for ornamenation.

'But I'll arrange it anyway, no matter what anyone says. Where else would I find such a lovely daughter-in-law? But look, sister, is his body hot or am I just imagining it?'

Nirmala felt Sohan's forehead and said, 'No, no, it is hot. When did this fever start? He's drinking milk, isn't he?'

'Just now when he fell asleep his body was cool. Maybe he's caught cold. I'll wrap him up and get him back to sleep. He'll be fine by the morning.'

In the morning Sohan's condition became even worse. His nose was running, his fever had gone up, his eyes were red and his head dropped. He stirred neither his hand nor foot, he didn't laugh, he didn't speak, but just lay quite silent. It seemed that at this moment he did not like hearing anyone talk. He had also begun to cough a bit. Sudha worried now. Nirmala also thought that they should call Doctor Sahib, but her old mother said, 'The doctor wouldn't be of any use here. I can see plain as anything that the child's been struck by the evil eye. What good would the doctor do?'

'Ammaji,' said Sudha, 'who is here who would put the evil eye on him? Since he's been here he hasn't gone out anywhere.'

'Anyone can lay an evil eye!' said the mother. 'If some person has an evil glance it can come on all by itself. Sometimes even the parents' glance can put the evil on. When I saw him dancing around so happily I was afraid that something bad was about to happen. Don't you see how red and puffy his eyes are? That's the surest sign of the evil eye.' The old housemaid and the local *pandit's* wife confirmed this theory. Finally Mahngu the exorcist came, looked at the child's face and laughed. He said, 'Mistress, this is the evil eye, no doubt about it. Get some small, very slender reeds and give them to me. God willing, he'll be laughing by evening.'

Five pieces of reeds were brought. Mahngu cut them so they were even and tied them with a string, then muttering something he brushed them over Sohan's head. What happened was that the reeds turned into different sizes. Seeing this marvel all the women were wonderstruck. Now who could doubt that it was the evil eye?

Mahngu began again to tickle the boy with the reeds. This time the reeds became equal in size, with only a slight difference in length. All this was the proof that now the effect of the evil eye had abated. Reassuring everybody, Mahngu arranged to come back again that evening and went his way.

During the day the child's condition got even worse; his coughing become violent. In the evening Mahngu returned and put on his show with the reeds once more. The women ceased to worry. But Sohan passed the whole night coughing. It got so bad that several times his eyes turned up in their sockets. Sudha and Nirmala both sat up all night and, as it happened, got through it without any untoward incident. Now the old woman came up with a new idea: since Mahngu had not been able to lift the evil eye they would have to get some Maulvi to exorcise it. Sudha still was not able to inform her husband. The maid wrapped Sohan up in a shawl and took him to the mosque and had a spell said to exorcise the evil eye. In the evening another exorcism was performed, but Sohan did not lift his head. Night came, Sudha decided in her mind that if they got through the night she would send a telegram to her husband early in the morning.

But they could not get through the night with impunity. About midnight the child passed away. All in an instant Sudha's life treasure was snatched out of her hands.

The child about whose marriage they were joking a couple of days before had now the whole household weep. The boy whose mother's heart burst with joy when she saw his sweet and innocent face now made her heart break looking at him. The whole household consoled Sudha, but her tears did not cease nor could she find any solace. Her greatest sorrow now was wondering how she could face her husband when she had not even kept him informed.

The wire was sent that very night. The next day at nine Dr. Sinha arrived by car. When Sudha was informed of his arrival she began to sob all the more. The child (had already) received the oblation of water for the dead. Dr. Sahib went into the women's quarters several times but Sudha did not come to him — how could

she confront him? What kind of face could she put on? Through her folly she had snatched the jewel of his life from him and thrown it into the stream. To go to him now would break her heart completely. When he used to see the child at her bosom her husband's eyes would sparkle. Wobbling as he walked, the child would go to his father's lap. When his mother called him back again he would cling to his father's chest and no matter how much she coaxed and tempted him he would not abandon it. Then she would say, 'What a selfish little fellow!' Today whom could she hold to her breast when she went to his father? When he saw her arms empty what if he should cry out and burst into tears! Compared to facing her husband dying seemed far easier to her. She would not let go of Nirmala even for an instant for fear her husband might come in and face her.[45]

Nirmala said, 'Sister, what had to happen has now happened; how long can you hide yourself away from him? Mother said he won't leave until tonight.'

Staring with tearful eyes, Sudha said, 'How can I face him? I'm frightened lest as soon as I go to him my legs give way and I collapse.'

'Come along, I'll go with you. I'll see that you don't fall.' 'You won't leave me and run away?'

'No, of course, I won't run away.'

'My heart is already overflowing. I'm surprised that after such a thunderbolt I'm still sitting up. My dear, how he loved Sohan! I can't imagine what he must be going through. How can I console him when I myself will be in tears? Will he really leave tonight then?'

'Yes, Ammaji said he didn't take leave from work.'

The two young women went toward the men's quarters; but when they reached the doorway of the room Sudha said good-bye to Nirmala and entered the room alone. Doctor Sahib was upset over what Sudha must be going through. All kinds of doubts beset him;

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[45]Typically, he would not go into the women's quarters if another man's wife was there.

he had sat there ready to go to her but he did not feel up to it. Life seemed empty to him and in his heart of hearts he was in despair. If God had given him this gift only to take it away so quickly why had He given it at all? He had never prayed to God for children. He could have remained childless all his life but it seemed intolerable to him once having been given a child to be deprived of it. Was man then truly only a plaything of God? Was this the significance of life? Was it merely a child's doll-house which there was no reason either to build or destroy? But children too, after all, had affection for their dollhouses, their paper boats and their wooden horses. They would defend good playthings with their very life. If God was a child then He was a very strange one.

But the intellect could not accept God in this form. The infinite fabricator of creation could not be an unmanageable child. We attribute to Him all those virtues which are beyond the grasp of our intellect. Was playfulness among those immense virtues? Was it some game to steal away the life breath of laughing, frolicking children? Did God play such a brutal game?

Suddenly Sudha entered the room on tiptoe. Doctor Sahib stood up and, coming close to her, said, 'Where were you Sudha? I've been waiting for you.'

The room seemed to swim before Sudha's eyes. She threw her arms around her husband's neck and laying her head on his chest began to cry. But in this flood of tears she was aware of an immeasurable endurance and consolation. Pressed close to her husband's heart she felt the communication of a strange reviving strength, as though a lamp flickering in the breeze had found shelter.

Putting both hands on his wife's tear-wet cheeks the doctor said, 'Sudha, why are you so downcast? What Sohan was destined to do in this life he's done — so why should he linger on? Just the way some tree grows with light and water but becomes strong only from the fierce buffeting of the wind, so love too develops only from the onslaughts of suffering. When they're happy people find plenty of others to laugh with them but those who weep with us in our sorrow are our true friends. Those lovers who don't consider it a blessing to

weep with you — what do they know of the delights of love? Sohan's death has completely destroyed all our duality today. Only now have we seen one another as we really are.'

Sobbing, Sudha said, 'I was deceived by appearances. Alas! You couldn't even behold his face. I don't know where he'd picked up so much understanding in recent days. When he saw me crying he'd forget his own grief and smile at me. My darling's eyes closed on the third day. I wasn't even able to give him any medicine or treatment.'

When she said this Sudha's tears welled up again. Dr Sinha embraced her and said in a trembling voice, 'My dearest, no such child ever died whose loved ones' desire for medicine could be satisfied.'

'Nirmala helped me,' said Sudha. 'I did sleep a little bit but her eyes never closed. Throughout each night she kept sitting or pacing. I can't ever forget my debt to her. Are you really leaving today?'

'Yes, I had no time to arrange a leave. The Civil Surgeon[46] was away on a hunting trip.'

'But he always seems to be away on a hunting trip!'

'What else do kings and rulers have to do?'

'But I won't let you go today.'

'Well, I don't want to go either.'

'Then don't. Send a wire. When you leave I'll go with you and take Nirmala back with us too.'

When Sudha left him the burden on her heart had lightened. Her husband's loving, gentle speech had dispelled all her grief and woe. In love there is a faith, a patience, a strength without limit.

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[46] An Englishman.

18

When some catastrophe descends upon us we are not only grieved by it but must also put up with the taunts of others. People find that great opportunity to carp at us which they have been eagerly awaiting. Mansaram had died, it seemed, to provide people with an excuse to say unpleasant things about him. No one knows what people think but the obvious fact was that it was all due to the wickedness of his stepmother. Everywhere people were saying, 'God save children from being looked after by a stepmother. Anyone who wanted to uproot the home he'd established and put his beloved children in imminent danger, had only to marry a second time while his children were still at home. The arrival of a second wife had never failed to destroy a home. The very father who bestowed life on his children becomes the enemy of those same children as soon as wife number two arrives — it turns his mind. There's no such goddess born in this world who has considered another woman's children as her own.'

The trouble was people were not content with this criticism.

Now there were also some fine people who developed a particular affection for Jiyaram and Siyaram. They would show both boys great sympathy, to such a degree that a few women would even shed tears recalling the goodness and virtue of their mother. Alas! How could the poor woman know that as soon as she died her darlings would fall into such a desperate situation — and how would they get milk and butter any more!

'Why shouldn't we get it?' Jiyaram would say. 'Heavens!' the woman would answer 'Get it? My child, there are lots of ways of getting it. She just orders the cheapest watered milk and puts it down for you; take it or leave it — who's going to worry? Or else the poor dear has the servant order the milk to be milked. The way you look when you drink milk can't be disguised — and you don't look as though you're getting milk.'

Jiyaram did not remember the taste of the milk from his mother's time so that he could answer this charge, nor did he remember what he looked like in those days, so he would remain silent. It was also a matter of course that there should be some effect from these good intentions. Jiyaram would get angry with the people in the family. When Munshiji had auctioned off the house and moved to another one he was worried about the rent, so Nirmala stopped buying butter. There was no income so how could they go on spending? The two men servants were dismissed. Jiyaram was not happy with these adjustments. Then, when Nirmala went to her mother's house, Munshiji banned milk as well as he had become obsessed with worry about the future of the newborn girl.

Jiyaram was annoyed and said, 'You're rebuilding your fortune by depriving us of milk, so let's stop eating dinner as well.'

'If you like drinking milk, 'said Munshiji, 'Why don't you go out and have the milking done? But I'm giving no money for milk that's been watered.'

'What if some boy from school sees me out — fetching milk?'

'So what? Just say, you're getting milk for yourself. Bringing milk isn't stealing.'

'It's not stealing! But wouldn't you be ashamed if anybody saw you milking?'

'Not at all,' said Munshiji. 'I've drawn water with these hands, I've carried sacks of grain. My father wasn't a millionaire.'

'But my father isn't a pauper, so why should I go out and milk? And anyway, why did you get rid of the servants?'

'You mean you can't even figure out that my income now isn't what it used to be? Surely you can't that simple-minded!'

'But why after all has your income become so small?'

'When you don't have any sense how can I explain it to you? I'm fed up with living — who's to take a case and when it's taken who will prepare it — I've no more heart left for that. Now I'm just ending up my days. All my ambition disappeared with my darling boy.'

'Through your own fault, wasn't it?'

'You blockhead!' Munshiji yelled. 'It was God's will. Does any man cut his own throat with his own hands?'

'It wasn't God who came along to get you to remarry.' Munshiji could no longer control himself. His eyes red and popping, he said, 'Did you come here to pick a fight with me today? How can you even dare? Are *you* supporting *me?* Give me advice when you've earned the right and then I'll listen, but now you haven't any right to tell me what to do. Study manners and decent behaviour for a little while. You're not my advisor that I should take advice from you about what I should do. Whatever money I've earned I can spend anyway I choose. You have no right to open your mouth. If you treat me with such rudeness again you'll regret it. If it didn't kill me to lose a treasure like Mansaram, I'm not going to die without you, do you understand?'

Even after being rebuked so harshly Jiyaram did not give ground. Fearlessly he said, 'Then what do you expect? That no matter what hardship we suffer we're not going to open our mouths? Well, I won't go along with that. I'm not looking for the reward my elder brother got for his good manners and decent behaviour. I don't have the courage to take poison and end my life — good manners like that I honour from a safe distance.'

'Aren't you ashamed to say such things?'

'Children only imitate their elders.'

But Munshiji's anger was stilled. He had come to accept that it was going to have no effect on Jiyaram. He got up and went out to take a walk. It had dawned on him today that the total destruction of his household was near at hand.

From that time on there was a wrangle between father and son everyday over something or other. The more lenient Munshiji was, the fiercer Jiyaram got. One day he went so far as to say to Rukmini, 'He's my father, with this in mind I leave him alone, otherwise I've got the sort of friends who, if I wanted it, I could have beat him up right out in the marketplace.' Munshiji made a show of nonchalance but in his mind a fear had arisen, and he gave up taking his evening walk. And he had to contend with a new concern; because of this same fear he had not brought Nirmala home, lest the little devil behave in the same way toward her. Jiyaram had already said once half under his breath, 'Let's just see how it's going to be for her coming here this time. If I don't let her know what I think of her, and to her face too, my name isn't Jiyaram. What can the old guy do about that?' Munshiji too had come to understand clearly that he could do nothing with him. If it had not been someone of his own family he would have handed him over to the police and the clutches of the law. What was he to do with his children? The saying was true — when a man is undone, it's by his own sons.

One day Dr. Sinha sent for Jiyaram and tried to reason with him. Jiyaram remained polite, sat down and listened quietly. When Dr. Sinha asked, 'What is it you really want?' he answered, 'Can I speak plainly? You won't take it ill?'

'No, tell me plainly just what it is you feel.'

'Then listen. Since my brother died I get mad just to see my father's face. It seems to me as though he murdered my brother and one day when he gets the chance he'll kill Siya and me too. If that wasn't what he wanted, why would he remarry?'

Suppressing his amusement with difficulty, Dr Sinha said, 'I'm afraid I can't quite understand why he had to get married in order to murder you. He could have done that without getting married.' 'Certainly not,' said Jiyaram. 'At that time he felt differently. He

would have given his life for us. Now he doesn't even want to look at us. What he wants is to have nobody in the house except himself and her. He wants us out of the way of whatever children he's going to have, that's what those two people really have in mind. By making it tough for us he wants to drive us out. That's why he doesn't go to work any more. Once the two of us have run away, then just see what prosperity there'll be.'

'But if he wanted to chase you away, then he'd have accused you of something and driven you out of the house.'

'Well, I've been expecting that for some time.'

'May I know just what it is you've been expecting?'

'When the opportunity arises, you'll see sure enough.'

With this, Jiyaram started to leave. Dr. Sinha kept calling him but he turned and did not look back.

After several days Dr. Sinha met Jiyaram once again. The doctor was a cinema fan and Jiyaram spent most of his time at the movie theatre. Dr. Sahib started a conversation with Jiyaram, criticising the film, and brought him along to his house. It was dinner time and the two of them sat down to eat. Jiyaram, who found the food delicious, said, 'Since the cook at our house has been let go there's no pleasure left in eating. *Buaji*[47] cooks regular *Vaishnava* meals which I'm obliged to eat but I don't even like looking at my food.'

'The meals cooked in this house,' said Dr. Sahib, 'are usually much tastier than this. I suppose your aunt won't touch onions or garlic?'

'That's right, sir, she just boils everything. My father doesn't care in the least whether anybody eats or not. That's why he fired the cook. If there's no money, how come my stepmother wears jewels everyday?'

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[47] i.e., Rukmini. *'Vaishnava'* cooking indicates boiling, not sauteing, without onions, garlic or strong spices.

'That's not how it is at all, Jiyaram. Your father's income has really dwindled to much less than it was. And you cause him a lot of grief.'

Jiyaram laughed. 'I cause him grief? I swear by you, I never even talk to him. He's determined to blame me for everything. He's after me all the time for no reason. It's got to the point where he's angry with my friends too. Just think, can anybody go on living without friends? I'm no criminal keeping company with other criminals, but he keeps tormenting me about my friends. Yesterday I told him straight out, "My friends are going to come to my house whether anybody likes it or not." Sir, is there anybody who can put up with threats all the time?'

'But my friend, I feel sorry for him,' said the doctor. 'This is the time when he ought to be taking it easy. For one thing, there's his age, and in addition his grief for his son and then his health isn't good either. What can such a man do? The little bit he's able to manage is actually too much for him. But you — if you can do nothing else you ought at least to please him by the way you act. It's not at all difficult to please elderly people. Believe me, for you to speak and laugh is enough to make him content. What would it cost you just to ask, "Dad, how are you feeling?" but when he sees your rebelliousness, he keeps feeling hurt. What I'm telling you is true — he's already shed tears many times. Agree that he made a mistake in remarrying — he accepts this — but why do you turn away from your duty? He's your father, you ought to serve him. You shouldn't utter one word that would grieve him. Why do you even give him a chance to think that while all these people live off what he earns not one of them cares about him? I'm quite a bit older than you, Jiyaram, but I've never talked back to my father. He still scolds me today and I listen with my head bowed. I know that whatever he says to me is only for my own good. Who can be better disposed towards us than our mother and father? Who can ever be free of his debt to them?'

As he sat there Jiyaram began to cry. His decent instincts had not yet completely disappeared. His wickedness was at this moment

clearly apparent to him. For a long time he had not felt so remorseful. In tears he said to the doctor, 'I feel terribly ashamed. I was led astray by others. From now on you won't hear any more complaints about me. Ask my father to forgive me for my offences. I'm really very unfortunate and I've caused him a lot of torment. Tell him to forgive me, otherwise I'll blacken my face and go off somewhere and drown myself.'

The doctor was delighted with the success of his advice. He embraced Jiyaram and said good-bye to him.

When Jiyaram reached home it was after eleven o'clock. Munshiji had already eaten and come away from the dining room. As soon as he saw him he said, 'Do you realise what time it is? It's going on twelve.'

Very humbly Jiyaram said, 'I met Dr. Sinha. I walked home with him and he insisted that I stay and eat with him. I really couldn't get out of it. That's why I'm so late.'

'I suppose you went to Dr. Sinha with your tale of woe or did you have some business with him?'

One quarter of Jiyaram's new humility flew out the window. He said, 'It's not my habit to go around telling tales of woe.'

'No, of course, it isn't, and I suppose you don't have a tongue in your mouth either! And the people who talk to me about you must be just making things up!'

'I can't vouch for other times but today at Dr. Sinha's house there was nothing at all said that I couldn't say to your face.'

'I'm delighted to hear it, delighted beyond measure! Did you get your initiation into sainthood today?'

One quarter more of Jiyaram's humility disappeared. He lifted his head and said, 'A person can be ashamed of his misdeed even without being a saint. You don't need a special *mantra*[48] in order to turn over a new leaf.'

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[48] Incantation.

'So now your hoodlums won't be congregating here?' Jiyaram said, 'Why do you call somebody a hoodlum when you have no evidence for it?'

'Your friends are all hoodlums and idlers. There's not one decent fellow among them. I've already told you several times not to let them keep gathering here, but you've never listened. I'm telling you now for the last time that if you bring them here again I'll be obliged to call in the police for help.'

Another quarter of Jiyaram's humility vanished. Bristling, he said, 'All right, get help from the police and we'll see what the police will do. More than half of my friends are sons of police officers. If you're so bent on reforming me, then why should I put myself to any trouble all for nothing?'

Saying this, Jiyaram went off to his room; a moment later the soft tones of the harmonium were heard.

The lighted lamp of help had been extinguished by a gust of cruel sarcasm. With gentle treatment a balky horse had begun to try hard, but as soon as the whip struck him he balked again and began to shove the wagon back.

At this point Nirmala had to come back with Sudha. She wanted to stay a little while longer at her mother's but she could not let Sudha stay alone in her grief: for her sake she had to return. When she was home, Rukmini said to Bhungi, 'Do you see how beautiful she looks after staying with her mother?' And Bhungi said, *'Didi,* girls love the bread their mothers make for them.' To which Rukmini said, 'You speak truly, Bhungi, only a mother knows how to feed her own.'

It appeared to Nirmala that nobody in the house was pleased by her return. True, Munshiji displayed great pleasure, but he could not conceal his profound worry. Sudha had bestowed the name of Asha[49] on Nirmala's daughter. She was indeed just like an image of hope: when you looked at her all your worries disappeared. When Munshiji wanted to take her on his lap she would begin to cry and run to clutch her mother, as though she did not even recognise her father. Munshiji tried to woo her with sweets. But there was no servant in the house, so he went to Siyaram and asked him bring a couple of *annas* worth of sweets. Jiyaram was also nearby and he burst out, 'No sweets are ever brought for the two of us!'

Flaring up, Munshiji said, 'You two aren't children.'

'What are we then? Grown-ups? Send for some sweets and you'll find out whether we're adults or children. Put out another four *annas* and let us have a little treat, thanks to Asha.'

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[49]i.e., hope.

'I don't have any small change on me right now,' said Munshiji. 'Go along, Siya, and come back quickly.'

'Siya won't go,' said Jiyaram. 'He's nobody's slave. If Asha's her father's daughter, then so is he his father's son.'

'What kind of nonsense is this! Aren't you ashamed to compare yourself to a tiny child? Go, Siyaram, take these coins.'

Siya was in a quandary. Whose order should he obey? Finally, he decided to heed Jiyaram. His father would scold him severely, but Jiyaram would beat him, and if that happened who could he complain to? He said, 'I won't go.'

'Very well,' said Munshiji in a threatening tone, 'but don't ever come to me asking for anything.' He went out then himself and came back with a rupee's worth of sweets — he'd felt ashamed to ask for only two *annas* worth. The sweets vendor knew him — what would he say in his heart?

Munshiji went inside with the sweets. When Siyaram saw the rather big bag he regretted not having obeyed his father. How could he go in with him now to get some sweets? It had been a great mistake. He began to make a serious comparison of the pain of Jiyaram's blows and the delicious taste of the sweets.

Suddenly Bhungi appeared with two dishes of sweets and set them down.

Angrily Jiyaram said, 'Take them away!'

'Why are you getting mad, *Babu,* don't sweets appeal to you?'

'They came for Asha, not for us. Take them away or I'll throw them out on the road. We kept begging for every penny and here comes a rupee's worth of sweets.'

'If he really won't have them,' Bhungi said, 'then Siya *Babu,* you have them.'

Siyaram had scarcely stretched out his hand fearfully when Jiyaram rebuked him. 'Don't touch those sweets, otherwise I'll break your hand and flatten you, you little glutton!'

When he heard this threat Siyaram was terrified and had not the courage to eat the sweets. When Nirmala heard what had happened she went to try to appease the two boys while Munshiji swore at them.

'You don't understand,' said Nirmala. 'All their anger is against me.'

'He's become too insolent,' said Munshiji. 'The only reason I don't deal with him severely is that people would say I'm mean to motherless children. Otherwise I'd get all the wickedness out of him in less than an hour.'

'But I'm afraid of being blamed for that too,' said Nirmala. 'Well, I'm not going to be afraid any longer, people can say whatever they please. He wasn't like this before.'

'Good Lord, he says; "You had your sons, why did you remarry?" He doesn't even hesitate to say that we gave Mansaram poison. He's not a child, he's an enemy.'

Jiyaram was standing behind the door. He'd come to hear what husband and wife would have to say concerning the sweets. When he heard Munshiji's last sentence he could not control himself and burst out, 'If he weren't an enemy then why would you torment him? I figured out a long time ago what you're saying now: my brother didn't, he fell for the deception. You won't get away with it with us. Everybody's saying *Bhai* Sahib was given poison, so why should you be angry if I say it?'

Nirmala was aghast. She felt as though hot coals had been heaped on her body. Munshiji scolded and tried to make Jiyaram keep quiet, but the boy, undaunted, had a retort for everything he said. It reached the point where even Nirmala lost her temper with him: this boy, who did nothing, who was useless, was rudely disputing as though he were the sole master and provider of the household. She frowned and said, 'Stop it, Jiyaram, you've said enough! We've learned just how deserving you are. Go out and sit down.'

Until now Munshiji had been getting the worst of it, but when he got Nirmala's support he was spurred on. Grinding his teeth he made a dash — and before Nirmala could restrain his hand he struck out. The blow caught Nirmala in the face, and she fell down

before him, her head spinning. She could not have imagined that there was so much power left in Munshiji's dried up hands. Munshiji's anger flared up even more fiercely, again his fist flew out, but this time Jiyaram caught his hand pushing him back said, 'Talk from a safe distance — why are you disgracing yourself all for nothing? Out of consideration for *Ammaji* I'm holding back, otherwise I'd show you.'

With that he left them. Munshiji was stunned. If at this moment a thunderbolt had struck Jiyaram he would probably have been profoundly happy. The son who had delighted him when he took him in his lap was today the object of every kind of evil imagining.

Until this moment Rukmini had stayed in her room; she came out now and said, 'Your son is grown up now, you shouldn't lift your hand against him.'

Biting his lip, Munshiji said, 'I'll lift him right out of the house, that's what I'll do, I don't care if he begs or steals, it's all one to me.'

'And who'll be disgraced by that?'

'I don't care about that either.'

Nirmala said, 'If I'd known that my coming here would cause this upheaval, I wouldn't have returned under any circumstances. Even now the only good thing to do is to send me away. I can't stand it here any longer.'

'You're treated with great consideration here, *Bahu*,' said Rukmini. 'Otherwise there would have been a real catastrophe today.'

'What more catastrophe can there be, *Didiji?* I walk as on egg shells here and even so I'm deemed wicked. It all started in no time at all after I set foot in this house. Only God can make anything good of it!'

That night none came in for supper except Munshiji, who ate alone. At this point Nirmala was beset with a new concern: how could she carry on with her life and survive? She had no great worry for herself, but now she was afflicted with the additional source of distress: 'Oh Lord, what is written in the child's fate?'

20

Who can sleep when worried? Nirmala was tossing and turning on her charpoy. She longed so much to be able to sleep, but sleep had sworn an oath not to come. The lamp was extinguished, the windows were open, in another room a clock was ticking, but there was not a trace of sleepiness. She had done with thinking about whatever there was to think about, even her worries had reached an end, but her eyelids would not stay shut. Then she lit the lamp again and began to read a book. She could have read no more than two or three pages when she dozed off, leaving the book open.

Suddenly Jiyaram stepped into the room. His legs were unsteady. He surveyed the whole room. Nirmala was asleep. In the niche by the head of her bed a rather small brass box had been placed. On tip-toe Jiyaram went to it, carefully took the box down and swiftly went out of the room. At this moment Nirmala's eyes opened. Startled, she got up, went to the door and looked. Her heart was pounding. Was that Jiyaram? What had he come into her room to do? Could she have been mistaken? Maybe he had come into *Didiji's* room — but what business could he have had to tell her at this hour? What motive could he possibly have? Her heart beat all the more.

Munshiji was up on the roof sleeping. Because there was no partition for privacy Nirmala could not sleep up there. She wondered if she should go up and wake Munshiji, but she had not

the boldness to go. He was a suspicious man and there was no telling what he would make of this or what he was ready to do. Anyway, who could say, perhaps she had been mistaken. In sleep sometimes such illusions occur; but even after she'd resolved to ask about it in the morning she still could not sleep.

When she herself took Jiyaram his breakfast next morning he was startled to see her. After all, Bhungi came every day, why had Nirmala come this morning? He did not dare look directly at her.

Watching him with trustful eyes Nirmala said, 'Did you come into my room last night'.

Pretending astonishment, Jiyaram said 'I? — What would I have come for? Why, did somebody go to you?'

With a look that indicated she believed him completely, Nirmala said 'Yes, it seemed to me that someone went out of my room. I didn't see his face, but from his back I guessed you might have come for some reason or other. How could I tell who it was? But there was somebody, of that there's no doubt.'

Trying to clear himself, Jiyaram said, 'I went to the theatre last night. From there I went to spend the night at a friend's house. Some other friends were with me too. Ask anyone you want. I'm really worried about this — if it turns out that something's disappeared, then maybe I'll be blamed. If the thief can't be caught, then they'll say I did it. You know what Father is like — he'll come running to give me a beating.'

'Why would anyone blame you?' said Nirmala. 'If it had been you, well, even then no one would accuse you of stealing. Other people's things get stolen, no one steals his own property.'

Until now Nirmala had not so much as glanced toward the niche where her box was kept She began to prepare the morning meal, then when Munshiji left for court she went to meet Sudha. She had not seen her for several days now. Afterwards, her thoughts turned back to the incident last night. She said to Bhungi, 'Bring my jewel box from my room.'

Bhungi came back and said, 'There's no box there. Where did you put it?'

Irritated, Nirmala said, 'You can't get anything done on one try! If I left it in the room where could it have gone? Did you look in the closet?'

'No. *Bahuji.* I didn't look in the closet — why should I lie to you?'

Nirmala broke into a smile. She said. 'Go and look, and be quick.'

In a moment Bhungi came back empty-handed. 'There's nothing in the closet either. Now tell me where to look next.'

Nirmala was vexed. She stood up and said, 'God knows why He ever bothered to give you eyes! Just watch now whether I bring it from the room or not.'

Bhungi followed her into her room. Nirmala looked at the bedside niche then, opened up the closet and searched there as well as under the charpoy and then in the big clothes chest. There was no trace of the box. She was astonished and could not imagine where the box could have gone to.

Suddenly the event of last night blazed up before her eyes like lightning and her heart skipped a beat. Until now she had searched without worry, but now she became feverish as she began hastily to look everywhere. How could so large a box be concealed under the bedding? — but still she spread it out and looked. With every second her face was growing paler and paler, and she could not be comforted. Finally in despair she struck her fist against her breast and began to weep.

Jewels are a woman's only wealth. She has no authority over anything that belongs to her husband. Her jewels are her strength and pride. Nirmala owned jewels worth five or six thousand rupees. When she put them on and went out, for that period of time her heart was filled with joy. Each piece of jewellery was like a weapon to protect her against obstacles and disasters. Only last night she had been thinking that she would not stay on as a housemaid for

Jiyaram.[50] God forbid that she should ever have to beg of anyone. With her jewellery as fare she would get her ship across, nor would she let her daughter arrive at just any port, so she had nothing to worry about. Today they were her adornment, tomorrow her support; how much this thought had consoled her heart! And today that wealth had slipped away from her.

Now she was utterly helpless. In the whole world she had no recourse, no support. The basis of her hopes had been torn up by the root, and she sobbed. Oh God she thought, how can you let this happen! To beat down a poor creature like myself, and now strike her blind! To whom could she hold out her hand now, at whose door could she beg? She was soaked in perspiration, her eyes were swollen with weeping. With her head bowed she went on crying. Rukmini tried to console her but her tears did not stop, the flame of her grief did not abate.

At three o'clock Jiyaram came back from school. When she heard that he had come Nirmala sprang up like one possessed, rushed to the door of his room and said, 'My dear, if it's a joke, then just give it back. What do you get out of tormenting a poor woman?'

For an instant Jiyaram was in panic. This was his first essay in the art of thieving. He had not yet acquired that cruelty which is gratified by violence. If he still had the box and if then he could find the opportunity to put it back in the niche, perhaps he would not have let the chance go by. But the box had already left his possession — his friends had brought it to a goldsmith and quickly sold it cheap. Except for lying like a thief, what recourse had he? He said, 'Really, *Ammaji,* would I play such a trick on you? You've never stopped being suspicious of me. I've already told you, I wasn't at home last night; but you simply won't believe me. It really hurts me that you think me so low.'

Wiping her tears, Nirmala said, 'My dear, I'm not suspicious of you, I don't accuse you of stealing. I just thought maybe you were playing a joke on me.'

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[50] i.e., after Munshiji's death.

How could she suspect Jiyaram of stealing? Everyone would be sure to say that she was accusing him just because the boy's mother was dead, and she alone would be disgraced.

To console her Jiyaram said, 'Come now, let me look. Who could have taken it, after all? How could a thief have broken in?'

Bhungi said, '*Bhaiya,* you're talking about thieves coming in. Well, they can come through the mouse holes, and aren't there windows all over this house?'

'I've searched everywhere,' said Nirmala. 'Where do you think I can look now?'

Jiyaram said, 'You people sleep like the very dead.'

When Munshiji came home at four o'clock and saw the state Nirmala was in he asked, 'Aren't you feeling well? Are you in pain?' Then he lifted Asha up onto his lap. Nirmala, unable to answer him, began to weep again. Bhungi said, 'Nothing like this has ever happened. I've spent my whole life in this house but until today not so much as a pice has been stolen. People will say that it's Bhungi's work. May God preserve my honour now.'

Munshiji was unbuttoning his jacket; he rebuttoned it and said, 'What's happened? Has something been stolen?'

'All *Bahuji's* jewellery has disappeared,' said Bhungi.

'Where was it kept?'

Between sobs Nirmala recounted the whole story of last night, but she made no mention of someone who looked like Jiyaram leaving her room. Munshiji sighed deeply. 'God is very unjust,' he said. 'He's striking down those who are already down. It seems as though unlucky days are upon us. If a thief got in, where did he come from? There's no break in the wall made by a burglar, there's no way for him to enter anywhere. I haven't committed any sin so great that I should receive such punishment. I've told you time and time again, "Don't put your jewel box in that niche" — but who paid any attention to me?'

'How could I know that this calamity would strike us?' said Nirmala.

'Well, you knew that not everyday was the same as another. If I were to have those jewels made up today they'd cost no less than ten thousand. I haven't concealed from you the difficulties we're in these days; we can barely meet expenses. Where shall we be able to get jewellery from? I'm going to report it to the police, but don't think there's any hope of getting them back.'

Nirmala objected. 'If you know nothing will come of reporting it to the police, why are you going to do it?'

'Because I'm worried about it, what do you think? After suffering such a loss I can't just sit by and say nothing.'

'If we were going to get them back then why would they have disappeared in the first place? If it wasn't destined for us to keep them then how could we hold on to them?'

'If it's destined, then we'll get them back. If not, they're just gone,' said Munshiji, and started to leave the room. Nirmala caught his hand and said: 'I tell you, don't go! I'm afraid that instead of helping us it will only make things worse.' Munshiji freed his hand and said, 'You're being childishly stubborn! A loss of ten thousand rupees is not the sort of thing which I can just sit back and take. I'm not crying, but what I feel only I know.'

He quickly left the room and went directly to the police station, where the inspector received him courteously. He had once had this inspector, whose name was Alayar Khan, acquitted of a charge of bribery. The inspector now returned with Munshiji to conduct his investigation.

By evening the inspector had searched every corner of the house, including Nirmala's room in the women's quarters. He had a good look at the parapets surrounding the roof and then had a few words on the sly with some men of the neighbourhood. Afterwards he said to Munshiji, 'On my oath, sir, this is no outside job. Believe me, had anybody from outside done it I'd have him in jail this very day. Is there any servant in your house you suspect?'

'There's only one maid in the house these days,' said Munshiji. 'Oh yes, and she's bit cracked. But I swear, this is the work of somebody very cunning.'

'But who else is there in the house? My two boys, my wife and my sister. How could I suspect any of them?'

'I swear, this is the work of somebody of the household, no matter who it may be. God willing, in two or three days I'll have news for you. I can't promise you'll get all the property back, but God's oath, I'll catch the thief and show him to you.'

When the Inspector left, Munshiji came to Nirmala and told her what he'd said. Nirmala was frightened. She said, 'Go and tell the Inspector to stop the investigation, I beg you.'

'But for heaven's sake, why?'

'How can I tell you now? He says somebody from the household is guilty.'

'Let him babble.'

Jiyaram was sitting in his room and remembering God. He had gone deathly pale. He had heard it said that the police could guess from a person's face. He didn't dare come out of his room but he was frantic to know what the two men were talking about. As soon as the Inspector had left and Bhungi came out to do some work or other, Jiyaram asked her, 'What was the Inspector saying, Bhungi?' Bhungi came up to him and said, 'The bastard was saying that someone in the house committed the theft, not anybody from the outside.'

'Didn't *Babuji* say anything?'

'He said nothing except "Hmm hmm." And Bhungi's the only one in the house who's an outsider, all the others belong to the family.'

'I'm an outsider too,' said Jiyaram, 'why do you think you're the only one?'

'My dear, what do you mean you're an outsider?'

'Didn't *Babuji* tell the Inspector that he suspected somebody in the house?'

'I didn't hear him say anything. That wretched Inspector did say, "Bhungi's a little cracked, how could she have done it?" But *Babuji* was getting me involved.'

'Still, you weren't implicated. That leaves only me. Tell me now, did you see me in the house that day?'

'No, my dear, you'd gone to the theatre' — she pronounced it 'thayter.'

'You'll testify to that, won't you?'

'What are you saying, my dear? *Bahuji* will stop the investigation. '

'Really?'

'Yes, my dear, she keeps asking for there not to be any inquiry. The jewels are gone, forget it — but *Babuji* won't listen to her.'

For the next four or five days Jiyaram did not eat a full meal. He would sometimes eat two or three bites, sometimes he'd say he wasn't hungry. His complexion had gone sallow. He spent the nights without sleep, worrying every moment about the Inspector. If he had known that the business would take such a bad turn he would never have committed the crime. He had assumed that they would suspect it was some thief and never turn their attention to him; but now it looked as though the secret was out. Jiyaram was very anxious about the way the cursed Inspector was conducting the investigation.

On the evening of the seventh day when Jiyaram came home he was very worried. Until this moment he had held some hope or other of getting away with it. Thus far the goods had not been recovered. But today he heard that the jewels had been found. At this very moment the Inspector would be on his way with the constable. There was no way out for him. It was possible that by bribing the Inspector the case would be dropped. He had rupees in hand. But would the matter remain a secret? Even while the jewels had not been located there was a rumour being spread in town that it was the son himself who'd lifted them. With the recovery of the

jewels they'd be talking about it in every street. He would never again be able to show his face to anybody.

When Munshiji came back from court he was very upset. Holding his forehead he sat down on a charpoy. Nirmala said, 'Aren't you going to change your clothes? You're later than usual today.'

'Should I change my clothes? Haven't you heard anything?'

'Why? What's the matter? I've heard nothing.'

'The jewels have been recovered,' said Munshiji. 'It's going to be hard to get Jiya off now.'

Nirmala was not surprised. Her face seemed to say that she already knew all about it. She said, 'I kept asking you not to report it to the police.'

'You suspected Jiya?'

'How could I not suspect him? I saw him leaving my room.'

'But why didn't you tell me that?'

'It wasn't for me to say, you would surely have thought in your heart that I was accusing him out of jealousy. Tell me, would you have thought that or not? Please tell the truth.'

'It's possible, I can't deny it. Still, in the situation you ought to have told me. Then there would have been no chance for an inquiry. You were concerned about being thought well of but you didn't think what the consequences would be. I've just come from the police station. Alayar Khan must be on his way right now.'

In despair, Nirmala asked, 'Then what?'

Munshiji looked up at the sky. 'Next, whatever God decrees! If I gave him one or two thousand as a bribe then maybe the affair could be hushed up; but you know my financial situation. Luck is against us, that's all there is to it. The sin is mine, but who will pay for it? I had one son and see what happened to him — and now what's happening to this one! He was unworthy and insolent and lazy — but still he was my own son, yet I was rarely aware of it. Such a blow is truly not to be endured!'

'If he can get off through our giving a bribe,' said Nirmala, 'then I'll arrange the money.'

'Can you? How much can you give?'

'How much will be needed?'

'The Inspector probably wouldn't even consider it for less than a thousand. In a trial once I took a thousand from him. He'll get even with me now.'

'I'll see to it. Go to the police station right away.'

Munshiji spent a long time at the station. He found occasion to hold a long conversation in private. Alayar Khan was a shrewd old fox. It was not easy to get him to take the bait. He assumed the burden of obligation only after accepting five hundred rupees. The deal was settled. Munshiji came home and said to Nirmala, 'Well, my dear, I was successful. You gave the rupees, but it was my tongue that accomplished the work. It was very very hard to get him to agree. This too is something to keep in mind. Has Jiyaram already eaten?'

'How could he? He's still out somewhere wandering around.'

'But it must be past twelve already.'

''I've gone several times to look, but it was dark in his room.'

'And Siyaram?'

'He's had his dinner and gone to sleep.'

'Didn't you ask him where Jiyaram had gone to?'

'He just says that Jiyaram went away without telling him anything.'

Munshiji suspected something. He woke Siyaram and asked him, 'Didn't Jiyaram say anything to you about when he'd come back or where he went?'

Siyaram scratched his head and rubbed his eyes. 'He didn't say anything to me,' he said.

'Was he all dressed up when he went out?'

'No, just *kurta* and *dhoti.*'

'At the time he left was he happy?'

'He didn't seem too happy. Several times he started to go in to *Ammaji's* room but after he got to the doorway he came back. He stood under the portico for several minutes. When he started to go he was wiping his eyes. For several days now he's been crying a lot.'

Munshiji sighed a long sigh as though nothing was left in his life and said to Nirmala, 'You did what you did for the best as you understood it, but not even my enemy could strike me so cruel a blow. If it had been Jiyaram's mother, would she have hesitated the way you did? Never.'

'Why don't you go to Dr. Sinha's?' said Nirmala. 'He may be stopping by there. A lot of boys go there everyday, ask them; maybe you can find out something. My being too cautious has only brought us dishonour.'

Munshiji, speaking as though from an opened window, said, 'Yes, I'm going — what else can I do?'

When he came out of Nirmala's room he saw Dr. Sinha standing there. Astonished, he asked him, 'Have you been out here a long time? '

'Not at all,' said Sinha, 'I've just come. Where are you off to at this hour? It's past twelve-thirty.'

'I was on my way to see you. Jiyaram hasn't come back yet from his roaming. Did he stop by your place?'

Dr. Sinha took both Munshiji's hands and could say, '*Bhai* Sahib, now you must bear...' when Munshiji, like a man who has been shot, fell to the ground.

21

Frowning at Nirmala, Rukmini said, 'Is he going to school barefoot?'

Nirmala, who was braiding the little girl's hair, said, 'What can I do? I've no more money.'

'Money can be found for having jewellery made, but for a boy's shoes the rupees have all gone up in smoke. Two of them have already gone — is it your intention to finish the third one off by making him cry himself to nothing?'

Nirmala sighed. 'Whoever's fated to live will live, whoever's to die will die; it's not for me to make anybody live or die.'

These days Nirmala and Rukmini had a daily dispute about one thing or another. Since the jewels were stolen, Nirmala's nature had changed completely. She now held on to every paisa for dear life. Siyaram might die from weeping, but he got no small change for sweets; and this behaviour was directed not only at Siyaram. Nirmala even neglected her own needs. She would not put on a new *dhoti* until the old one was in shreds. For months at a time she would order no new oil for her hair. She was fond of *pan,* but for days at a time the *pan* box would stay empty. It reached the point that no milk was bought even for the baby. Asha's future, taking on vast proportions, hovered over the field of her thoughts.

Munshiji had given himself completely into Nirmala's hands and interfered with none of her activities. It was not clear why he

remained under her thumb. Now he went off to his work in court never taking a day off. Even in his youth he had not toiled so hard. His eyes were going bad and Dr. Sinha forbade him to read or write at night. His digestion had been none too good before, now it got even worse. He began to suffer from asthma too, but the poor fellow kept working from early morning half way through the night. Whether he felt like it or not, whether he was well or sick, he had to do his work. Nirmala felt not the least pity for him. This same frightening worry about the future had destroyed all her decent instincts. When she heard some beggar raising his cry she would fly into a rage. She did not want to spend even the smallest sum.

One day Nirmala sent Siyaram out to get some *ghee.* She did not trust Bhungi, she no longer entrusted any business to her. Siyaram, who was not accustomed to cheating, had no idea about taking a cut for himself. He usually had to do all the marketing. Nirmala would weigh every single item, and if one was the least bit underweight she would send it back. Siyaram spent a good deal of time in this running back and forth. The shopkeepers were not eager to sell him anything. Such were the circumstances on this particular day. Siyaram, after checking with several shops, had brought back what he considered excellent *ghee,* but Nirmala, as soon as she sniffed it, said, 'This *ghee* is bad, take it back.'

Getting angry, Siyaram said, 'There's no better than this in the market, I've checked in every single shop.'

'Are you saying I'm lying?'

'I'm not saying that, but now the merchant won't take this *ghee* back, he told me: "Inspect the goods as much as you like, here it is in front of you, but don't bring it back just as I'm starting my sales for the day." I smelled it and tasted it before I took it — how can I take it back now?'

Scowling, Nirmala said, 'It's got grease mixed in with it and you say it's good *ghee!* I won't even take this into the kitchen — so take it back if you like or else eat it yourself.'

Leaving the pot of *ghee* right there, Nirmala went into the house.

Siyaram was confused between anger and agitation. How could he show his face in the market? The shopkeeper had plainly said he wouldn't take the *ghee* back. What could he do now? A dozen or so shopkeepers of the neighbourhood would gather and he would be shamed before them all. In the market it would not be easy to get any merchant to sell him anything; he would be rebuked from all sides. Deeply angered, he said, 'Let the *ghee* stay where it is, I'm not going to take it back.'

There's no sadder creature in the world than a motherless child. All other sorrows can be forgotten, but the child remembers his mother. If his mother were there today would he have to put up with all this? His brothers were gone — why had he been saved to bear all this calamity alone? Tears streamed from Siyaram's eyes. The words came from his grief-constricted throat mingled with a deep sigh: '*Amma*! why have you forgotten me, why haven't you called me to you?'

Suddenly Nirmala came back toward his room. She had assumed Siyaram must have left. When she saw him sitting there she said angrily, 'You're still sitting here? When do you think the meal is going to get cooked?'

Siyaram hastily wiped his eyes and said, 'I'll be late for school.'

'What harm is there if you're late once for school? This is family obligation.'

'But this work is laid on me everyday. I never get to school on time. And I don't have any time to study at home either. You don't accept anything until it's been returned two or three times. I'm the one who gets blamed, I'm the one who has to be embarrassed, it's nothing to you.'

'It's nothing to me, is it? So I've just turned into your enemy; if it had been my child, then I would have suffered. But I've talked God into making you incapable of reading and writing. Every wickedness and nothing else is in me. It's not your fault. The very name of stepmother is evil. If your mother fed you poison it would be nectar, but even if I feed you nectar it turns into poison. Because of you people my life has been ruined. I spend my whole life weeping, I can't figure out why God gave me life. And you think I'm

just having a good time tormenting you! Even God doesn't care if it should be the end of the whole mess.'

As she said this Nirmala's eyes filled with tears. She went back to her room. Siyaram was frightened when he saw her crying. But he did not feel remorseful, on the contrary he was worried about what punishment he might get. He quietly picked up the pot of *ghee* and went to take it back, just the way some dog sneaks into a new village. And just like a dog's, everyone of his movements expressed his inner anguish. To see him even a person of little intelligence would guess that he was an orphan.

As Siyaram walked along his heart began to beat faster with fear of the battle that lay ahead. He decided that if the shopkeeper wouldn't take the *ghee* back he would just leave it there and come away. The shopkeeper would start raving and call him back. Siyaram had even thought of the words to rebuke him. But even after resolving this he walked along more slowly. He didn't want the shopkeeper to see him coming, preferring to appear before him suddenly. Therefore he took a roundabout way and reached the shop by way of another alley.

As soon as he spotted him the shopkeeper said, 'I told you not to bring anything back. Answer me, did I tell you or didn't I?'

Flaring up, Siyaram said, 'Who did you give that *ghee* to that you showed me? You showed me one thing and gave me another, how can you not take it back? What are you, some kind of highwayman?'

'If there's any better goods in the market I'll pay a forfeit! Take this pot and show it around in two or three other shops.'

'I don't have time for that,' said Siyaram. 'Take back your *ghee.*'

'I won't take it back.'

A *sadhu* with matted locks was sitting on the shop platform watching the fun. He stood up, came over to Siyaram, sniffed the pot of *ghee,* and said, 'My child, this *ghee* seems to be excellent.'

'*Babaji,*' said the shopkeeper triumphantly, 'We don't knowingly give inferior products to people. Would we give bad merchandise to knowledgeable customers?'

The *sadhu* said, 'Take the *ghee* and go, child, it's fine.'

Siyaram burst into tears. What means did he have now to prove that the *ghee* was bad? He said, 'But she says the *ghee* isn't good, take it back. But I told her it was all right.'

'He must be talking about his mother,' said the shopkeeper. 'Nothing ever pleases her. She makes the poor lad run back and forth constantly. A stepmother, you know! If his mother were alive she'd take care of things.' The *sadhu* regarded Siyaram with compassionate eyes, as though his heart longed to give him shelter. Then he said sympathetically, 'How long has it been since your mother died, child?'

'Six years,' said Siyaram.

'Then at that time you must have been very young. Oh Lord, how strange are the games you play! You deprived this nursing child of a mother's love. What great calamity you visit upon us, Lord! A six-year-old child in the clutches of a devilish stepmother! Blessings on the treasure of compassion! Shopkeeper, take pity on the child. Take back the *ghee,* otherwise his mother won't let him stay in the house. With God's help the *ghee* will be quickly sold and my blessing will be upon you.'

The shopkeeper would not give the money back. But if in the end the boy had to go home with the *ghee,* who could tell how much running around he would have to do during the day and what hardships he would have to contend with. So he took the very best *ghee* he had in his shop and gave it to Siyaram. Siyaram was thinking to himself how kindly the *Babaji* was. Had he not recommended it, was it likely the shopkeeper would have given him the best *ghee?*

When he took the *ghee* and set out, *Babaji* accompanied him and began to talk most sweetly to him along the way. 'Child, my mother also left me and went to heaven — when I was only three. Since then whenever I see a motherless child my heart is close to breaking.'

Siyaram asked him, 'Did your father take a new wife too?'

'Yes, child, otherwise why would I be a *sadhu* today? At first my father didn't remarry. He loved me very much. Then I don't know

why his heart changed — he married. I'm a *sadhu,* bitter words should not issue from my mouth, but my stepmother was as cruel as she was beautiful. She would give me nothing to eat all day. If I cried she beat me and my father became indifferent to me. He hated the very sight of me. If he heard me crying he'd beat me. So finally one day I ran away from home.'

The thought of running away from home had occurred many times to Siyaram too, and it was in his mind this very minute. Eagerly he said, 'When you ran away from home where did you go?'

Babaji laughed and said, 'On that very day all my troubles came to an end. On the day I freed myself from the illusory attachments of home and fear left my heart, it was as though on that very day I was saved. I stayed the whole day sitting under a bridge. In the evening a holy man chanced upon me. His name was Swami Paramanandji. He had taken the vow of celibacy in childhood. He felt pity for me and took me along with him. He was a very fine *yogi* and he taught the knowledge of *yoga* to me too. I've become so adept at it by now that if you wanted I could raise up a vision of my mother and talk with her.'

His eyes popping, Siyaram asked him, 'But isn't your mother already dead?'

'And what does that matter, child? In the science of *Yoga* there's power by which one may summon up any dead soul you want.'

'Then if I learned *yoga* I too could see my mother again?'

'Of course! With practice everything becomes possible. But of course you need a *yogic* master. Through *yoga* one may acquire very great magical powers. You can call up just as much money as you want, and whatever illness strikes you can tell what the medicine for it is.'

'Where are you staying?'

'Child, I don't stay anywhere. I just go wandering from one region to another. Now, child, go along, I must perform my ablutions and meditate.'

'Please don't mind me, I'll go along that way too. I haven't yet had enough of your company.'

'No, child, you'll be late getting to school.'

'When will I see you again?'

'I'll come sometime, child; where is your house?'

Happy, Siyaram told him, 'Come along to my house, it's very close. It would be very kind of you.'

Siyaram set out on his way as happy as if he were carrying a bundle of gold. When they reached the house he said, 'Come, please, sit here a little while.'

'No, child,' said the *sadhu,* 'I'll come sometime or other tomorrow or the day after. This is your home?'

'What time will you come tomorrow?'

'I can't say for certain. But I'll come sooner or later.'

When the *sadhu* started on his way after a bit he met up with another *sadhu* whose name was Harianand. Paramanand asked him, 'Where all have you been wandering? Have you had good hunting?' Harianand said, 'I've been walking all around without catching anything. The few people I met just made fun of me.'

'Well, I think I've stumbled on a good possibility. Just see if I don't snare him.'

'You're just talking. Everyone you find runs away after a few days.'

'This one won't get away, you'll see. His mother's dead, his father's remarried and his stepmother torments him too — he's fed up with home.'

'Well, if that's the case you most likely will trap him. I presume you've baited the trap?'

'Expertly! This is the best scheme of all: first one should find out which houses in the neighbourhood have stepmothers, and then spread the net in just those houses.'

22

Nirmala asked him angrily, 'Where have you been all this time?' Insolently, Siyaram replied, 'I fell asleep somewhere on the way.'

'I'm not saying that but do you know what time it is? It struck ten some time ago. The market isn't very far either, is it?'

'Not at all far, it's practically at the door.'

'Why don't you talk sensibly?' Nirmala said. 'You're getting angry as though you were off doing something only for me.'

'Then why are *you* babbling on all for nothing? You think it's easy to return something you've bought? You have to wrangle for hours with the shopkeeper. And it was only because a *sadhu* persuaded him, otherwise he'd never have agreed to exchange it. I didn't stop one minute anywhere on the road, I came straight back here.'

'You went for *ghee* and you get back at eleven; if you went for wood would you bring it by evening? Your father left without eating. If it was going to take you so long why didn't you say so before? Are you going for wood?'

At this Siyaram could not control himself. Angrily he said, 'Get someone else to bring the wood. I'm late for school.'

'Aren't you going to eat?'

'No, I won't.'

'I'm ready to make your meal,' said Nirmala, 'but I can't go for the wood.'

'Why don't you send Bhungi?'

'Haven't you seen the sort of stuff Bhungi brings back?'

'Well, I'm not going now.'

'Then don't blame me.'

Siyaram had not gone to school for several days. Because of doing the marketing he had no time to look at his books. If he went to school what would he get except scolding, having to stand on the bench or wearing the dunce cap? So he would leave home with his books, but he would go and sit under the shade of some tree outside town or watch the troops drill, then come home at three o'clock. This morning he left home too, but he was longing for something to eat. Couldn't the meal have been cooked by ten o'clock? He supposed that *Babaji* had gone away. For himself weren't there even a few pennies in the house? If his mother were alive would she let him go off like this without having anything to eat or drink? He felt that now there was nothing of his own left.

Siyaram longed for a meeting with *Babaji*. He wondered where he might find him at this time. Where could he go to see him? He found himself powerfully attracted by the *sadhu's* pleasant speech, his encouragement and consolation. Restlessly, he said, 'Why don't I just go off with him? What's there at home for me?'

Today, instead of going home, he went straight to the *ghee* merchant's shop, thinking he might find the *sadhu* there. But *Babaji* was not there. Siyaram waited for a long time and then started back home.

He had hardly reached the house and sat down when Nirmala came and said, 'Where have you been so late? There was no meal this morning, is there going to be a fast now too? Go to the market and get some vegetables.'

Siyaram flared up and said, 'I've gone hungry all day, you didn't even offer me any water to drink. On top of that, you order me to go to the market. I'm *not* going to the market! I'm nobody's servant. So

finally are you going to give me some bread or something else? When I'm working I'll earn my bread, but when I have to earn a wage it won't be for you. So go on, don't give me anything to eat.'

Nirmala was speechless. What had happened to the boy today? On other days he would just go quietly and do what he was supposed to, why was he scowling so today? Even then it did not occur to her to give him a few coins to get something to eat, so miserly had she become. She said, 'Doing chores at home is not considered a paying job. On that basis, I could say that I won't cook. If your father should say he won't go to court, tell me what would happen? If you don't want to go don't. I'll send Bhungi out. How did I know it offends you to go to the market, otherwise what do I care? Even if it costs a paise for something worth half that, I wouldn't have sent you. Just watch, from now on I'll be penitent.'

In his heart Siyaram was a little ashamed but he did not go to the market. His mind was fixed on *Babaji*. The end of all his sorrows, all the hopes of his life, seemed now to depend on *Babaji's* benediction. By going to him for shelter his life, so established, would become worthwhile. By sunset he was becoming anxious. He had combed the entire market but found no trace of the *sadhu* anywhere. This naive child, hungry and thirsty all day, trying to subdue his grieving heart, like a very image of hope and fear, went wandering everywhere, past shops, in alleys and temples, looking for that refuge without which his life had become intolerable. Once someone came into view standing before a temple and he thought that it was he. Overwhelmed with joy he ran and came to stand beside the *sadhu;* but it was a different holy man. Disappointed, he went on searching.

Gradually the streets were becoming deserted, houses were shutting up their doors. Spreading out sacks or bamboo cots on the sidewalks and in the alleyways, the common folk of India began to sink into blissful sleep, but Siyaram did not return home. That house had broken his heart, nobody loved him there where he stayed on like some kind of helpless dependent only because he had no other refuge. Even now would anybody worry about his coming home? His father must have eaten and gone to lie down, *Ammaji* too must be resting now. Probably nobody had so much as glanced

toward his room. But *Buaji,* true, would be upset and probably still waiting up for him, and wouldn't have her supper until he'd come home.

As soon as he remembered Rukmini, Siyaram headed for home. Even if she could do nothing else she could at least hold him tight and weep. She would have put out water for him to wash when he came back home. Not every child in the world can rinse his mouth with milk, not everyone eats dainty morsels. How many never fill their bellies? — But one deprived of a mother is truly cut off from home.

Siyaram had just started for home when suddenly Baba Paramanand appeared, coming from an alley. Siyaram went to him and grasped his hand. Surprised, the *sadhu* asked him, 'Child, what are you doing here?'

Inventing an explanation, Siyaram said, 'I came to meet a friend. How far is your place from here?'

'Child, we're all leaving here on a pilgrimage to Hardwar.' Siyaram was terribly let down. He said, 'Are you going today?'

'Yes, child, when I come back I'll come to you and you'll have my blessing.' In a weak voice Siyaram said, 'When will you come back?'

'I'll come back soon, child.'

Humbly Siyaram said, 'I'll go with you too.'

'With me! Will your family let you go?'

'What do I care about my family!' After this Siyaram could say nothing more. His tearful eyes told his story far more eloquently than could his words.

Paramanand embraced the boy. 'Very well, child if it's your desire, then come along, enjoy the company of *sadhus* and holy men. If God wills, your wish will be fulfilled.'

The bird hovering over the bit of grain had finally pounced upon it. Who could say whether his life would end in a cage or under the butcher's knife?

23

Munshiji came back at five, went inside and threw himself down on his charpoy. An old man's body, and on top of that he hadn't eaten the whole day, and his mouth was dry. Nirmala realised that it had been a profitless day.

'Didn't you get anything today?' she asked him.

'I spent the whole day running around but I got nothing for it.'

'What happened in that criminal case?'

'My client was found guilty.'

'What about the case involving the *pandit*.'

'The court found against the *pandit*.'

'But you told me the charge would be dismissed.'

'So I did, and I still say the charge ought to have been. But how could I keep on arguing the point?'

'And that cultivator's claim?'

'I lost that one too.'

'Surely you must have seen some ill-omened face when you got up this morning!'

Munshiji was by now quite incapable of work. For one thing, cases were not offered to him, or if they were he handled them badly. But he made a habit of concealing his failures from Nirmala. On those days when he earned nothing he would borrow a few rupees

and give them to Nirmala. He had already taken some money from most of his friends. Today he had not even been able to do that.

Anxiously Nirmala said, 'If your earnings are in such a state then God alone can help us. On top of all this, your son is causing a fuss about going to the market. He wants to have Bhungi do all the work. He took the *ghee* and didn't get back until eleven. No matter what I said I couldn't get him to go and fetch the wood.'

'Then dinner hasn't been cooked?'

'It's by saying silly things like that that you lose you cases! Without fuel has anyone ever cooked that I should be able to?'

'So he went off without eating anything'

'What was there in the house that I could give him?'

Alarmed, Munshiji said, 'Didn't you give him a few coins?'

'I suppose coins grow inside the house!'

Munshiji did not answer. He waited for a long time for some snack to be offered him. But when Nirmala did not even order some water the poor fellow left the room in despair. Imagining Siyaram's distress he became anxious. The whole day had gone by and still the poor boy had eaten nothing. He was probably lying in his room. If Bhungi were sent out once for the firewood, what harm in that? What was the point of this kind of economising if the whole house went hungry? He opened his box and began to fumble in it, hoping to find a little cash. He dumped out all the papers and documents he kept there, looked in every drawer, but found nothing. If rupees didn't grow in Nirmala's box, then flowers were not blooming in his. But call it a matter of luck, it happened that in the cataract of papers one four-*anna* coin fell out. Munshiji leapt up for joy. In olden days he had earned immense sums, but never before had he been so delighted as he was now to find this four-*anna* pice. With the coin in his hand he went to Siyaram's room and called out to him. There was no response. Then he went into the room and looked. No trace of Siyaram. He had still not returned from school? As soon as this possibility occurred to him he went to Bhungi and asked her. It turned out that he had come back from school.

'Did you give him some water?' Munshiji asked her. Bhungi did not reply. She wrinkled up her nose, turned away and left him.

Today for the first time he was angry with Nirmala, but in an instant he felt the anger turning against himself. Lying on the floor in that darkened room he began to reproach himself for having become so indifferent toward his son. Exhausted from the whole day's labours he quickly fell asleep.

Bhungi came and called, '*Babuji,* dinner is ready.' Startled, Munshiji sat up abruptly. A lamp was burning in the room.

'What time is it, Bhungi?' he asked her. 'I fell asleep.'

'Nine has already struck by the police station clock, that's all I know.'

'Has Siya *Babu* come home?'

'If he had wouldn't he be here in the house?'

Irritated, Munshiji said, 'I'm asking if he's come or not, and God knows what to make of your answer. Has he come or not?'

'I haven't seen him — why should I lie?'

Munshiji lay down again and said, 'I'll stay here until he comes.' For a half hour he lay looking toward Siyaram's room, then he got up and went out and walked along to the right a couple of furlongs. Then he came home and at the door asked, 'Has Siya *Babu* come?'

From inside the answer came: 'Not yet.'

Then Munshiji went off to the left and reached the corner of an alleyway. Siyaram was nowhere in sight. From there he returned once more to the house and standing at the door asked, 'Has Siya *Babu* returned?'

A voice from inside answered, 'No.'

Ten began to strike from the police station clock.

Munshiji hastily set out for the city park. He thought that perhaps Siyaram had gone wandering there and fallen asleep while lying on the grass. When he reached the park he searched every

bench, walked in all directions — quite a few people were lying on the lawn but there was not a trace of Siyaram. He called his name out very loudly but there was no answer from any direction.

He wondered then if perhaps there was some entertainment at the school. The school was more than a mile away. He walked toward it but half-way there turned back. The market was closed by now: surely there could not be anything going on at the school so late. He hoped now that Siyaram might have returned home. At the door of his house he called, 'Has Siya *Babu* come?' The folding door panels were closed; there was no reply. Then he called out more loudly, and Bhungi opened the doors. 'He still hasn't come back,' she said. Munshiji gently called Bhungi to him and in a piteous voice said, 'You know everything that goes on in this house, tell me what happened today.'

'Munshiji, I won't lie to you,' said Bhungi. 'The mistress will throw me out, of course, but... Somebody else's son should not be treated like this. Whenever there was any errand, she sent him to the market. He spent the whole day running back and forth. Today he wouldn't go for wood so the stove wasn't lit. If you tell her she'll be furious. If you yourself don't see what's going on, then who else will? Come and have your dinner now, *Bahuji* has been waiting a long time.'

'Tell her I won't eat now,' said Munshiji. He went back to his room again and sighed. The words he spoke were full of anguish: 'God haven't you yet finished punishing me? Have you deprived me of even this support?'

Nirmala came to him said, 'Siyaram hasn't come back yet. I told him that I was making dinner, he should eat, but he got up and went off somewhere or other. I have no idea where he's wandering. He doesn't even listen to what I say. How long shall I keep on waiting for him? You go and eat, I'll take his food away and keep it ready for him.'

Munshiji stared at her with severe eyes and said, 'What time do you suppose it is now?'

'Who knows, it must be ten.'

'Far from it: it's twelve.'

'Twelve! He's never been this late. Well, how long are you going to wait for him? He didn't eat anything at noon either. I've never seen such a boy for going off wandering.'

'He causes you a lot of trouble — why?'

'Well, just look how late it is and he doesn't even think of home.'

'Maybe this is his last escapade.'

'What things you say! Where would he go? He's probably spending the night with one of his chums.'

'Perhaps that's so,' said Munshiji. 'I pray to God that it is.'

'When he comes home in the morning, try to reason with him a little bit, won't you?'

'I'll have a good talk with him.'

'Come and eat then, it's terribly late.'

'I'll eat tomorrow morning after I've had my talk with him. If he doesn't return, where else are you going to find so dependable a servant?'

Nirmala was offended. She said, 'Do you mean I've driven him away?'

'No — who's saying that? Why would you? He does your chores for you! Something dreadful must have happened.'

Nirmala said no more: she was afraid to go on with the conversation. She went inside without even telling him to go to sleep. In a little while Bhungi shut the doors from inside.

Could Munshiji fall asleep? Only one son out of the three had been saved. If this one got away from him what would be left in his life except darkness? There would not be even one left to bear his name. Oh, how had three such treasures slipped away from him? It was no surprise now if tears were flowing from Munshiji's eyes. In that consuming remorse, that deep depression, one very thin line of hope had survived. In the instant that line would disappear, who

could say what he would experience? Who could imagine this anguish of his?

Several times Munshiji's eyes closed but each time he was roused suddenly, imagining he heard Siyaram's footsteps.

As soon as it was morning he resumed his search for the boy. He was ashamed to make any inquiries — how could he face asking anyone? He expected sympathy from no quarter. Though they would not say so openly everybody would say to himself, 'He's reaping what he sowed.' All day long he made the rounds of the school playing grounds, the markets and orchards. Although he had not eaten for two days somehow or other his energy was undiminished. When Munshiji returned home at midnight a lantern was burning in the doorway and Nirmala was standing there. As soon as she saw him she said, 'You didn't even tell me, I had no idea when you went out. Did you find out anything?'

Staring at her with blazing eyes Munshiji said, 'Get away from me or you'll regret it, I can't guarantee that I'll control myself. This is your doing. It's only because of you that this has happened to me now. Was this house in a state like this six years ago? This household I worked to build you've spoiled, you've laid waste a flourishing garden. Only one stump was left, and now that you've wiped out every trace of him you can be content. I didn't bring you to my home to destroy me. I wanted to make a happy life even happier. This is the penance I have to do for that. Those boys who were so delicately reared you treated like servants before my very eyes. And I, seeing it all, sat by like a blind man. Just go and give me a little arsenic. This is the end, there was only this left to hurt me and now this is taken care of too.'

In tears Nirmala said, 'How unlucky I am! If you tell me to I'll go away. I don't know why God brought me into the world. But how can you assume Siyaram won't ever come back?'

As he went into his room, Munshiji said, 'Don't get angry, go and celebrate — now your heart's desire has been fulfilled.'

24

Nirmala wept the whole night. What a disgrace! Even when she'd seen Jiyaram taking her jewellery she hadn't had the courage to open her mouth. Today she was held to be guilty for having kept silent, fearing people would have assumed she was making a false accusation because she was itching for a confrontation with the boy. If she had stopped Jiyaram that very instant and he, shamed, had run away somewhere, would she not have been blamed for that as well?

In the case of Siyaram too, how had she behaved badly? She had sent him out to do the marketing only with the thought of a little economising. Was it as though she wanted to have jewellery made for herself out of the money she saved? When their finances were in such a state, how else could she hold on to a little cash except by keeping a sharp eye on every single pice? There was nothing for the young to depend on for survival, so what refuge was there for the old? Who would there be to beg from for her little girl's wedding? But the responsibility for her daughter was not her alone. She had tried to accumulate a little money only for the well-being of her husband. Why just for her husband? After his father Siyaram alone would be the master of the house. The responsibility for his sister's wedding — wouldn't that fall to him? Nirmala had been scrimping and scheming only to free her husband and son from future hardship. In such circumstances what else would her daughter's wedding be if not a hardship? But in her fate it was decreed that for this too she was to be blamed.

It was already noon but today as well the stove was not lit. No one recollected that eating is also one of the activities of life. Munshiji was lying as though lifeless in his room, Nirmala in hers. The little girl went back and forth between them. There was nobody to talk with her. Often she would go to the door of Siyaram's room and stand, calling out, 'Brother, brother!' Brother did not answer. In the evening Munshiji came to Nirmala and said, 'Do you have any money?'

Alarmed, Nirmala asked him, 'What are you going to do?' 'I asked you something: Answer me!'

'You mean you don't know the answer? You're the one who gives out the money!'

'Do you have any money or not? If you do, give it to me, if not, just say so straight out.'

Nirmala still did not give a direct answer. 'If there is wouldn't it be in the house? Where else would I send it?'

Munshiji went out. He was certain Nirmala had some money, and she really did. She hadn't said she would or wouldn't give, it, but from her words it was plain she didn't want to let him have it.

At nine that night Munshiji came to Rukmini and said, 'Sister. I'm going away for a bit. Have Bhungi tie up my bedding roll and pack some clothes in the suitcase.'

Rukmini was making her supper; she said, 'Your wife is in her room, why don't you ask her? Where are you planning to go?'

'I'm asking *you,*' said Munshiji. 'If I meant to ask her, why would I ask you? Why are you cooking?'

'Who else is there to cook? *Bahu* has a headache. But really now, where are you going? Why don't you leave in the morning?' Munshiji said, 'I've been putting it off like this for three days. I want to travel around looking, maybe somewhere I'll find some trace of Siyaram. Some people were saying he was talking with a *sadhu.* Maybe he's enticed Siya off with him to some place.'

'When will you be back?'

'I can't say. It may take a whole week, maybe a whole month. How can I set a limit?

'What's the day today? Did you ask some priest whether it is an auspicious day for setting out on a journey?'

Munshiji sat down to eat. At this moment Nirmala felt a great pity for him. All her anger had been pacified. She did not herself speak to him but woke her daughter, petted her and said, 'Go and find out where your *Babuji* is going — ask him, won't you?'

Peeking from the doorway, the girl asked, '*Babuji*, where are you going?'

Munshiji said, 'I'm going far, my dear, to look for your brother.'

Still standing there she said, 'Take me with you.'

'It's very far. I'll bring back things for you. Why won't you come here?'

The child smiled and hid, then sticking her head out from behind the door she said, 'Take me too!'

In the same babyish lisp Munshiji said, 'I won't take you.'

'Why won't you?'

'But you won't come to me.'

The girl came toddling and sat in her father's lap. For a few moments Munshiji forgot his anguish playing with her hair.

After he had eaten Munshiji went outside. Nirmala stood watching. She longed to say, 'It's useless for you to go,' but she could not say it. She thought of taking out a few rupees and giving them to him but she could not do it.

Finally she could not bear it and said to Rukmini, '*Didiji*, please try to reason with him about where he's going. My tongue would get stuck but I can't stand not saying something. Where will he look when he has no idea where to go? He'll be disappointed all for nothing.'

Rukmini looked at her with compassionate eyes and went into her room.

With the child in her lap Nirmala was thinking that probably before he set out he would come to see her or the child, but her hope was in vain. Munshiji picked up his bedding roll and took his place in the *tonga*.

At that moment Nirmala felt an inner anguish; it seemed to her now that there was to be no meeting with him. In agitation she went to the door to hold Munshiji back, but the *tonga* had already gone.

25

The days were passing. A whole month had gone by but Munshiji had not returned, nor had he sent any letter. Nirmala was now constantly tormented wondering what would happen if he did not return. She was not concerned with what might be happening to him, where he might be wandering or what was the state of his health. She worried only for herself and, still more, for her daughter. How would they manage to maintain the house? How would God get them safely through it? What would happen to the child? The rupees she had put away by scrimping and saving were diminishing a little every day, as though someone were siphoning off her life's blood. She would get angry and curse Munshiji. If the child cried for something she would flare up and call her a little wretch. Not only this but she was distressed that Rukmini stayed on in the house, as though the woman were constantly pestering her.

When the heart is burning, the speech also catches fire. Nirmala was by nature a very mildly spoken woman, but now she could be reckoned a shrew. The whole day nothing but harsh and cutting words came from her mouth. No one could tell what had happened to her gentle speech. Nor was there a trace of sweetness left in her feelings. Bhungi had been a servant in this house for many years. By nature she was tolerant, but she could not stand the abusive talk every hour of the day, and finally she too bid the house farewell. Nirmala even began to hate the sight of the child whom she

had loved more than her own life. She would scold her at every turn and sometimes beat her. Rukmini would set the weeping girl in her lap and caress and fondle her to make her quiet. For the orphan only this refuge now still remained.

If there was anything at all now that gave Nirmala pleasure it was talking with Sudha. She sought every occasion to go to her house. But now she no longer wanted to take the child along with her. Formerly when the child got everything she wanted to eat at home, when she went to Sudha's she would just laugh and play: now when she went there she felt famished. Nirmala would scowl at her and threaten her with clenched fists. But the child would not stop saying how hungry she was, so Nirmala now would not take her with her. When she sat down at Sudha's she had the feeling that she was a person. For that much time she would become free of worry. As a drunkard forgets all his cares in the intoxication of wine, just so Nirmala would forget everything that was troubling her when she went to Sudha's. Anyone who had seen her at home would be astonished to observe her at Sudha's. That same harsh speaking shrew here became the very picture of a laughing, tender, fun-loving woman. The natural inclinations of youth, frustrated at home, here burst forth exuberantly. When she went to Sudha's she would go made-up and in her finery and, as much as she was able, keep her tale of woe to herself. She went there to laugh, not to cry.

But perhaps she was not fated to hold on to this happiness. Generally Nirmala would go to Sudha's at noon or in the early afternoon. One day she was so fed up that she arrived quite early in the morning. Sudha had gone for her ritual bath in the river, Dr. Sinha was dressing to go to the hospital, while the housemaid was engaged in her usual tasks. Nirmala went into her friend's room and sat there relaxing. She assumed Sudha was busy with something and would soon be coming. When two or three minutes had gone by she took a picture book out of the cupboard and, throwing back the *sari* from her head, lay down on the bed and began to look at the pictures. Meanwhile Dr. Sinha had to come to his wife's room for something or other, probably looking for his glasses, and walked in

without hesitating. Nirmala was lying, her hair let loose, her head toward the door. Startled when she saw Dr. Sinha, she sat up, covered her head and stood up. The doctor drew back to stand near the chick screen and said, 'Forgive me, Nirmala, I didn't know you were here. I can't find my glasses in my room. I don't know where I could have left them and I thought they might be here.'

Nirmala looked at the niche near the head of the bed and there indeed was the spectacles case. She took it and with her head bowed, wrapping herself up in her sari, she reached her hand out to him. Dr. Sinha had seen Nirmala a couple of times before but never experienced feelings such as he had now. The passion which he had suppressed in his heart for years, swept today by a gust of wind, flared up. When he reached out to take the spectacles case his hand was trembling. Even when he had taken it he did not leave but stood there as though lost. Nirmala, alone with him, was frightened. She asked, 'Has Sudha gone somewhere?'

With his eyes lowered Dr. Sinha answered, 'Yes, just for her dip in the river.'

And still he did not leave, but just stood there. Nirmala asked again, 'When will she be back?'

'She must be on her way now,' said Dr. Sinha, head bowed.

And still he did not leave. In his heart an intense conflict was taking place. Not the virtue of decency but the coarse streak of cowardice restrained his tongue. Then Nirmala spoke again: 'She must have gone for a walk. I'd better leave now.'

The coarse streak of cowardice snapped. When it reaches the precipice above the river the fleeing army acquires a wondrous strength. Dr Sinha raised his eyes, looked at Nirmala and said passionately, 'No, Nirmala, she'll be back any moment. Don't go now. You come here and visit everyday for the sake of Sudha, today do it for mine. Tell me, how long must I burn in this fire? Nirmala, I'm telling the truth...'

Nirmala listened no longer. It seemed to her as though the whole earth were whirling under her feet, as though lightning were

striking at her very life. Swiftly she seized the shawl dangling from a hanger and without uttering a word fled from the room. The doctor stood as though cowed, his face contorted as though he were fighting back tears. Courage failed him, he could not stop her or utter a word.

The moment she reached the front door Nirmala saw Sudha getting down from a *tonga.* As soon as she saw her Sudha dashed toward her, eager to ask her something, but Nirmala gave her no opportunity and made off swift as an arrow. Astonished, Sudha stood a moment, unable to understand what was wrong, then, uneasy, she quickly went into the house and asked the maid what had happened. She thought that perhaps one of the servants had said something insulting to Nirmala. She would find out who the offender was and promptly dismiss him. Close to running she went to her room and as soon as she stepped inside saw the doctor sitting on the charpoy with his head drooping. 'Was Nirmala here?' she asked. The doctor scratched his head and said, 'Yes, she was.' 'Did one of the servants say something to her? She didn't even speak to me, she just ran off.'

The doctor turned pale; he said, 'Nobody here spoke to her at all.'

'Nobody spoke to her at all! Now look, I'm asking you. God knows, when I find out I'll throw whoever it was right out of the house.'

In great embarrassment, Dr. Sinha said, 'But I didn't hear anybody talking to her. She must not have seen you.'

'Wonderful! She must not have seen me? But I was getting out from the *tonga* right in front of her. She even stared at me but didn't say a thing. Did she come to this room?'

Dr. Sinha felt his courage deserting him. Hesitating, he said, 'Why wouldn't she have come?'

'Perhaps she saw you sitting here and left. Anyway, some maid must have said something to her. They're a low-born crew, they have no idea of how to talk politely to people. Oh Sundariya! Come here for a moment, will you?'

'Why are you calling her?' the doctor asked. 'She went from this room straight to the front door. The maids said nothing at all to her.'

'Oh, then *you* must have said something to her.'

Dr, Sinha's heart was pounding. 'Really, what would I say to her? Am I such a boor?'

'You saw her coming and you went on sitting here?'

'I wasn't ever here. I was in the living room looking for my glasses. When I didn't find them there I thought maybe they were in here. When I came in I saw her sitting here: I intended to leave when she herself asked me, 'Is there something you need?' I said, 'Please have a look and see if my glasses aren't here.' They were in that niche at the head of the bed. She picked them up and gave them to me. That was all the conversation we had.'

'That was all? As soon as she gave you the glasses she got angry and dashed off!'

'She didn't go off angry. When she was starting to go I said, "Sit down, Sudha will be coming in a moment." If she wouldn't sit down, what could I do?'

Sudha thought a moment. 'I don't understand it at all, I'll go and see her and find out what happened.'

'By all means go, but what's the hurry? You've got all day for it.'

Sudha wrapped her shawl around her. 'I'm really upset by all this and you tell me there's no hurry?'

Walking swiftly Sudha reached Nirmala's house in five minutes. She found Nirmala in her room on her bed sobbing and the child standing near her, asking, '*Amma*, why are you crying?'

Sudha picked the child up and said to Nirmala, 'Sister, tell me straight out, what's wrong? Did someone in my house insult you? I've asked everyone but nobody will say anything.'

Wiping her tears, Nirmala said, 'Nobody insulted me, sister, and anyway, who in your house would say anything to me?'

'Then why didn't you speak to me and why did you start crying as soon as you got home?'

'I'm weeping over my bad luck, what else?'

'If you won't tell me willingly, I'll force you to take an oath to tell me.'

'Don't make me swear to tell you, my dear, nobody said anything to me. Why would I accuse anybody falsely?'

'Swear you'll tell me.'

'You're insisting all for nothing!'

'If you won't tell me, Nirmala, then I'll take it that you have no love for me at all, it's been nothing more than empty talk. I never hide anything from you and you think of me as a stranger! I used to have complete faith in you, now I've learned that nobody can trust anybody.'

Sudha's eyes filled with tears. She put the child down and started for the door. Nirmala got up, grabbed her hand and, still weeping, said, 'Sudha I fall at your feet, don't ask! You'd regret it and probably I'd have to hide my face in disgrace. If I weren't such an unlucky woman, why would this ever have happened to me? Now all I pray to God for is to be taken out of this world. If I've already had all this bad luck, who knows what lies ahead.'

The hint that was in these words could not remain hidden from clever Sudha: she guessed that the doctor had tried to flirt with her. She recalled his hesitant speech, his evasion of her questions, his depressed, downcast appearance. She began to shake from head to foot. Without saying or listening to anything more, filled with rage, she moved to the door like a lioness. Nirmala wanted to stop her but she could not. All in a moment Sudha was outside on the road walking toward her house. Then Nirmala sat right there on the ground and burst into sobs.

26

Nirmala stayed lying on her charpoy all day. She felt there was no life left in her body. She got up neither to bathe nor to eat. By evening she had a fever. All night her body burned like a hot griddle. Next day the fever did not subside. Lying on the charpoy, she stared with unblinking eyes toward the door. All around was still, only emptiness inside and outside the house. She felt no worry, no pain. In her brain there was no stirring of energy. Suddenly Rukmini appeared carrying the child. Nirmala asked, 'Has she been crying a lot?'

'No,' said Rukmini, 'she hasn't even whimpered. She was quiet all night long. Sudha sent over a little milk and I gave it to her.'

'Didn't the milk woman bring any milk?'

'She said, first pay up then she'd give. How are you feeling now?'

'I'm perfectly all right. Yesterday I felt a little warm.'

Rukmini said, 'Now the doctor's in a bad way.'

Distressed, Nirmala said, 'What's happened? He's all right, isn't he?'

'If you think it's all right when they're getting ready to carry away his corpse. Some say he took poison, others that he had a heart attack. God knows what really happened.'

Nirmala drew a deep sigh and said with a choking voice, 'Oh Lord, what will happen to Sudha? How will she manage?'

With that she burst into tears and sobbed for a long time. Then she got up from the charpoy and made ready to go to Sudha's. Her legs were trembling, she leaned against the wall, but she could not manage to go on. Who could say what Sudha had said to her husband when she left here, Nirmala thought. But she had told her nothing. What could Sudha have made of what she'd said? Alas! What an ending for such a handsome, compassionate, gentle creature. If Nirmala had known that this would be the terrible result of her anger she would have drunk a drop of poison and made the whole matter something to laugh at. The thought that it was because of her cruelty that this had happened to the doctor broke Nirmala's heart. She walked to the doctor's house feeling an anguish like a spear thrust through her heart.

The corpse had already been taken away. Outside all was silent. The womenfolk had gathered inside the house. Sudha was sitting on the floor weeping. As soon as she saw Nirmala she screamed and sobbed and then threw her arms around her. The two went on crying together for a long time.

When the crowd of women had thinned out and they were alone, Nirmala asked her, 'What happened, sister? What did you say to him?'

How many times had Sudha asked herself this question today! To Nirmala she gave the answer that had soothed her heart. 'I could not remain silent, sister! Only anger can come from a cause of anger.'

'But I told you nothing at all like that.'

'How could you? You couldn't say it but *he* told me what happened. Then I said whatever came into my head. When you have the occasion and opportunity then surely you have to act on them. By saying this no one can maintain that 1 treated it as a joke. To bring up such a charge without evidence shows that the motive is bad — I never told you before, sister, but often I saw him looking at you. On those occasions I thought that perhaps I was deceived. But

now it became obvious what the meaning of those looks was! If I'd more experience I would not have let you come to my house. At least, I'd never have let his eyes fall on you, but how did I know that men say one thing and feel something quite different? What God has willed has come about. I don't consider widowhood worse than a married life like that. A penniless person is far happier than a rich one whose wealth turns into a snake that soon bites him. It's easy to fast — taking poison is far more difficult!'

At this moment Dr. Sinha's younger brother and Krishna entered the house and filled it with lamentation.

27

Another month passed. On the third day Sudha left with her brother-in-law. Now Nirmala was alone. Formerly Sudha had consoled her and eased her heart with her laughter and talk. Now there was nothing left but to weep. Day by day her health went on declining. The rent for the old house was too much so she took another house at a lower rent in a narrow alleyway. It had one bedroom and a tiny courtyard. Neither light nor air came in. A stench pervaded the place, so bad that sometimes even when there was money for food they had to fast. Who would bring anything from the market? And then there was no husband, no son, so who would bother to make a dinner? What need is there to cook every day just for womenfolk? If there was one meal, there would be no other for a couple of days. For the child bread or fresh *halva* was made. In such a situation how could health not suffer?

One day Rukmini said, '*Bahu,* how long can you keep wasting away like this? Your health is the only thing in the world that matters. Come now, let me have a doctor come to see you.'

Nirmala, detached, said, 'For someone whose life is just weeping only dying is better.'

'Death doesn't come just because you call him,' said Rukmini.

'But it does come without being called, so why wouldn't it if you invite it. It won't be long before it comes, sister! Count the days I live as so many years.'

'Don't be so discouraged, sister! What have you yet seen of the pleasures of the world?'

'If this is the pleasure of the world which I've been looking at all this time, then I want no more of it. I'm telling the truth, sister, affection for this child has deluded me and tied me to life, otherwise by now I would have long since gone. God knows what's written in the fate of this poor little thing.'

Both women began to cry. From the time Nirmala had taken to her bed a stream of compassion had sprung up in Rukmini's heart. Not a trace of ill-will remained. Whatever work she might be doing, as soon as she heard Nirmala's voice she came running. She would sit with her for hours telling stories and tales from the *Puranas*. She slept when the child slept, woke when she woke. The little girl had become the stay of her life.

After a while Rukmini said, '*Bahu,* why are you so despairing? If God wills you'll be well in few a days. Come with me today to see the doctor, he's a very good man.'

'Didiji,' said Nirmala, 'no doctor's medicine would do me any good now. Don't worry about me. When I die I leave the child to you. If she survives, marry her into a decent family. I couldn't do anything for her in my own life. I'm guilty only of bringing her into the world. Let her be an old maid, or kill her with poison rather than tying her to an unworthy man, that's all I ask of you. I did not serve you and I'm sorry about that. Unlucky woman that I am, no one ever got any happiness from me. Anyone my shadow fell upon was destroyed. If my husband ever comes home, please ask him to forgive the mistakes of a luckless woman.'

In tears, Rukmini said, '*Bahu,* you have committed no mistake. I say to God in my heart there is no ill-will toward you. But I was never honest with you, and I'll regret that till my dying day.'

Looking at her with timid eyes, Nirmala said, '*Didiji,* there's something that shouldn't be said, but I can't keep back from saying it. *Swamiji*[51] always regarded me distrustfully, but I never, even in

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[51] Husband.

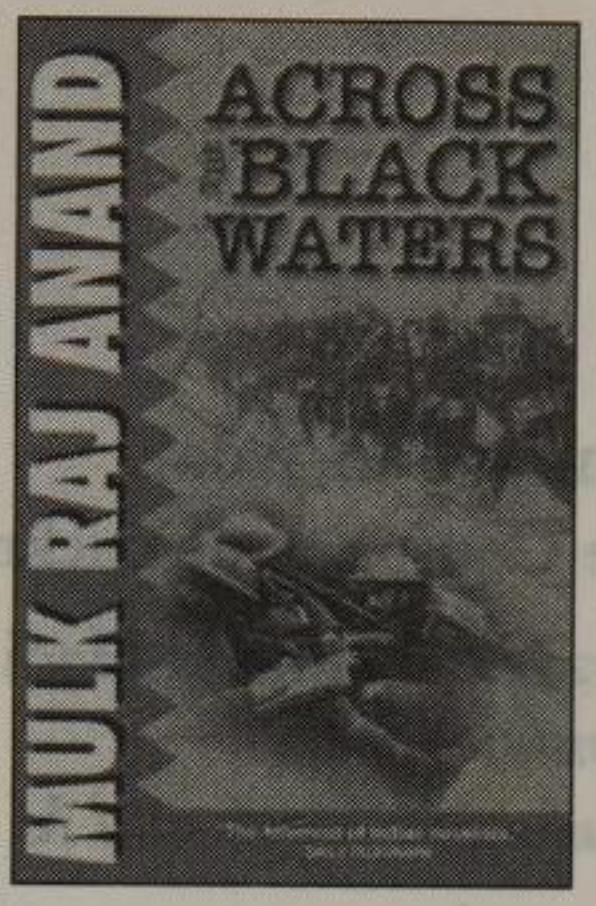
my inmost heart, was disloyal to him. What had to be has come about. Why would I spoil my next life by going against my *dharma?* I don't know whom I sinned against in an earlier life that I have had to do this penance for. If I sowed in this life too then how would I find salvation?'

For three days the stream of tears kept flowing from Nirmala's eyes. She neither spoke to anyone nor looked at anyone nor listened to what anybody said. This is all there was: she left the world weeping. Who could measure her anguish?

On the evening of the fourth day this tale of adversity came to an end. At that moment when beasts and birds were returning to their rest, the bird of Nirmala's soul, too, wounded and tormented through the long day by the hunters' shots, the claws of the birds of prey and the fierce buffets of the wind, flew off to its resting place.

The people of the neighbourhood gathered. The corpse was carried outside. The question arose — who would light the pyre? People were still perplexed when suddenly an aged wayfarer came carrying a bag and stood there. It was Munshi Totaram.

❐ ❐ ❐



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